

## PROMISES TO KEEP

[By Barb](#) (circa 1999)

Jennifer screamed.

"Uncle Johnny's here!" and with an enthusiastic bound she was out of the modest suburban LA home and running to greet a slightly dilapidated Land Rover.

Roy Desoto, Firefighter/Paramedic for LA County's Station 51 stood at the front door to his home and, with a grin on his face, watched his young daughter leap into the arms of the slender, dark-haired man exiting the vehicle. He waved at John Gage, his partner of six years, and opened the front screen door to let the younger man and little girl through.

"Hey Junior, right on time. I can't believe it." Roy shook his blonde head and watched as Johnny adopted a mock hurt expression before going on. "Chris is just finishing up with the packing. He's in his room."

Roy led his partner into the kitchen where his wife, JoAnne, was putting the finishing touches on a pan of cooled chocolate brownies. She stopped long enough to give Johnny a quick hug before turning back to her task.

"I've just got to cut these and they'll be ready to go into a container for you to take along. Are you really sure you want to do this?"

Johnny gave her his patented grin. "Of course I'm sure! How often do we get a four day weekend off, huh? Besides, you guys haven't had a weekend away from the kids for quite a while and I haven't been camping for a while so this is perfect!" he beamed.

"Yes, well, I'm not sure you realize what you're getting yourself into camping with these two." JoAnne murmured with a smile, then sobered a bit. "You have the telephone number of the bed and breakfast Roy and I will be staying in right?" Johnny nodded. "And you will stay in the more populated areas of the campground, too?"

Johnny put his arms around Roy's petite wife and reassured her.

"Jo, relax. We'll be staying near the playgrounds and easier hiking trails. I promise they'll be safe with me. I won't take them into the wilder areas. You guys just relax and enjoy your romantic get away."

JoAnne and Roy smiled at each other and Roy gave his wife a wink.

"I think we can manage that."

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The campsite Johnny had chosen was secluded enough to give him the feeling of being away from everyone but close enough to the bathrooms, playground and hiking trails to make it easy for the kids to enjoy themselves. He watched fondly as eight-year-old Jennifer and twelve-year-old Christopher

tried to puzzle out the workings of his four man tent. They had insisted on putting the campsite up by themselves with only verbal instructions from Johnny. Roy's kids loved camping with their 'Uncle' Johnny and wanted to experience everything.

Johnny marveled at how fast the two were growing. It only seemed like yesterday that he had first been partnered with Roy. Jennifer had only been a toddler then and Chris just turned six. Now here they were trying to set up a campsite. Johnny examined his charges, as dear to him as if they were his own, and noticed how much they resembled their parents.

//A miniature Roy and JoAnne// he thought to himself with some amusement. Christopher DeSoto shared his father's blonde hair, medium build and gentle smile while his younger sister looked like her petite, dark-haired mother. Currently Jennifer's hair was trying to escape from a long braid down her back and with her face flushed with exertion Johnny was suddenly struck with a vision of the kind of woman she would grow to be. A smile curled his lips with wicked glee.

//Oh, Roy. You'd better get your baseball bat polished up 'cuz you're going to have a real stunner on you're hands.//

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The campfire cast a mellow glow over the occupants of the campsite. Jennifer was trying hard to be a big girl and stay awake but the combination of activity, fresh air, a good supper and warm firelight was proving too difficult a combination to resist. Her eyes were determined to droop shut.

Chris was feeling a little sleepy, too, but enjoyed the feeling of 'the guys sittin' around shootin' the breeze', as his dad would say. Uncle Johnny always treated him as an equal and that made Chris proud.

The fire popped softly and an ember sparkled in the hot updraft. The conversation was meandering about the topic of the next day's activities when Johnny's ears caught a loud rustling in the nearby bushes. He wasn't unduly alarmed. Raccoons were notoriously bold around tourists here and made no bones about making their way into camp and sauntering off with anything edible. On the other hand, coyotes had been making themselves at home of late, too, and they were more worrisome.

Johnny had just decided to find himself a handy stone to toss at the intruder when the foliage nearest him burst apart with enough force to startle all three occupants to their feet. An ugly giant of a man crashed into the clearing followed closely by his small, balding companion. It was immediately apparent that the two dirty, ragged men were wearing penal uniforms with numbers clearly emblazoned across the front of each shirt. There was fear in their eyes. Fear and desperation. Not a good combination.

All this and more registered in Johnny's consciousness between one adrenaline pumping heartbeat and the next and he was turning toward the children before he even realized it.

"RUN!!! RUN, NOW!!!"

The words had barely left Johnny's mouth when he caught sight of the larger of the two convicts out

of the corner of his eye. With surprising speed one large, beefy fist backhanded him brutally across the face. Johnny found himself spinning and crashing to the hard packed earth. He was up again in a split second, ready to tackle the monster and buy the children time to run. Pulling up short, Johnny realized he was too late. The smaller man stood poised behind the frightened children, gun pointed menacingly at the back of Chris's head. A government issue gun. Probably taken off of a prison guard. A guard who was most likely dead at the time, Johnny opined.

"All right, mister, you just calm yourself and these two young ones of yours will be quite all right." The balding little man hissed. He seemed to have a sharp cunning and stared at Johnny with a challenging gaze.

Johnny paused uncertainly. He took a moment to spit blood from his split lips, the coppery taste strong in his mouth, and used the seconds to gather his scattered wits. He knew he was in a highly dangerous situation. If he and Roy's kids were going to get out of this alive he would have to use all of his imagination and resources. Right now he tried to dredge up the professional voice he used to calm a fractious patient.

"Ok. Ok. I'm sorry I got a bit carried away there. We'll just settle this nice and peaceful and you can be on your way. If it's my jeep you want I've got the keys right here. I'll toss them over to you. You can take any equipment or money that we've got. I just want the kids to be safe, OK? Can you let them come over here to me? You wouldn't want them cryin' out or anything, right?" Johnny spoke soothingly and made little 'come here' motions with his hands.

The large convict took a step toward Johnny and raised his hand again but the little man stopped him with a gesture.

"No, Ollie, it's all right. The kids can go to him. We're all going to sit down now and have a nice, little chat. Isn't that right, mister. . .?"

"Gage." Johnny reluctantly decided to play along for the time being. He couldn't afford to risk the children in a foolish show of arrogance. He gestured again and sighed with relief when Chris and Jenny scuttled fearfully to his side. Jennifer immediately wrapped her arms around Johnny's legs and hid her tearstained face against him. Johnny patted her gently on the head. Chris tried to look brave but found Johnny's other hand on his shoulder an immense comfort. All three lowered themselves cautiously to the ground.

Silence reigned for a few moments. Ollie's small companion visually searched the campsite thoughtfully while the hulking Ollie hovered menacingly over Johnny and his charges. Chris nervously divided his attention between watching the little convict's crafty eyes and his Uncle Johnny's, which burned with a cold fire. He had never seen his father's friend like this and it was both thrilling and frightening. Jennifer, settled protectively in Johnny's lap, was attempting to dab solicitously at the blood on her Uncle's face with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. In addition to the painfully smashed and bloody lips she noticed the bruise spreading across the lower right half of his jaw. This violation on her beloved Uncle infuriated her. With fire in her eyes she looked up into the ugly face of the man standing above them.

"You hurt my Uncle Johnny! I hate you!"

Johnny made shushing noises and patted Jennifer on the back while a slow smile spread across Ollie's face.

"Awwww, Max. She's a purdy liddle one, ain't she."

Johnny's head whipped around to glare menacingly at the huge man and froze at what he saw there. Before he could form his next thought the little convict, Max, stepped smoothly into the situation.

"Yes, Ollie, very nice. Now leave them be until I tell you different, all right? It appears that Mr. Gage, here, has quite an impressive array of camping equipment. I would venture to guess that you are somewhat skilled at the practice of outdoor living, Mr. Gage?"

Johnny tore his eyes away from Ollie's face to look into the speculative eyes of Max. "Yes, I suppose so. Why? I've told you, you can have the equipment, my truck, my money....?"

"Ah, but those things are easily come by if we so desired it. What we need is someone who can guide us through this vast national park, my friend. As I'm sure you have deduced by now, we are wanted men and even now I'm sure there are roadblocks up all over the surrounding area. So you see, driving out would be quite stupid, wouldn't it? No, I think it would be so much wiser if we did what the authorities wouldn't expect and end up 50 miles or so from where they will be looking. I have a feeling you are just the man to help us out. Am I right . . . Tonto?" Max gave a ferocious grin and cackled a bit at his own joke. Johnny remained silent as his thoughts spun wildly through all of his options. Ollie tore his lustful gaze from the little girl and swung it to Johnny.

"He's a injun, Max? Cool. He should get us through real good, then, right? You was right, Max. You said you'd find us a way. You're always right, Max." Ollie's eyes were full of hero worship for the little man. Johnny simply ignored the slur. He'd had to put up with worse in the past and he could put up with far more for the sake of these children that he loved so much.

"Ok. Ok. I'll guide you anywhere you want but only if you let the children go." Johnny knew it was a long shot but he had few options to deal with.

"Do I look stupid to you, Mr. Gage? You know as well as I that these two have heard our plans and will tell the first policeman they find. No, I don't think so, Tonto, but good try. They both go with us, and if you don't guide us I'll simply shoot the boy and give the girl to Ollie, here." At that Ollie's eyes lit up with anticipation. Johnny's eyes narrowed. He glared at Max, gritting his teeth.

"I'll guide you, you son-of-a-bitch, but if you let your trained ape over there lay one finger on Jenny or hurt these kids in any way I'll lead you around in circles till you starve to death. Is that clear?" Johnny had the small satisfaction of hearing a growl rise up from Ollie's throat as he stared into Max's thoughtful eyes. Max took in the fierce, determined set of Johnny's face and made careful note of the black hatred that emanated from the man's eyes.

"Very clear, Mr. Gage. I'll do my best to curb Ollie's more . . . unnatural proclivities. But should you play us false the boy will die and all bets are off concerning the young lady's future. I believe we have a deal, then. And now I think you should take the children and retire to your tent for the remainder of the night. Ollie will keep watch and we will set off before first light in the morning. Good Night, Mr.

Gage."

Johnny nodded and, rising quickly, shepherded Jenny and Chris before him to the tent and zipped it shut behind him. Ollie's fire lit silhouette splashed across the material of their shelter like an ominous stain. He settled the children as best he could and reassured them he would watch over them. Settling cross-legged at the front of the tent Johnny rubbed his sore jaw and prepared for a sleepless night.

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Roy DeSoto sighed contentedly. He was stretched out on an old Victorian high-rise bed watching his wife of fourteen years apply her make-up. It had been a wonderful trip so far. A romantic supper last night followed by a walk on the moonlit beach. What followed the evening's stroll made Roy's lips curl into an even wider, and very satisfied, grin. This morning, after sleeping in and a home-cooked breakfast from the Inn's hostess, they had strolled and shopped in the quaint tourist hamlet. Now, after a nap and showers, they were preparing for another night on the town. As soon as JoAnne was done with her primping they could be off.

"Roy, have you caught the weather yet for tomorrow? I hope it will be nice and warm. I'd love to go for a swim. Try out that new bathing suit I bought today." Joanne's sultry smile caused Roy to snatch up the TV remote.

"I'll just check on it right now, hon. The local news should be coming on now anyway." He hit the switch and watched Judy Lokk, the local anchorwoman, finish up a report on the current rush hour traffic snarls. She plastered a synthetically fake smile on her face and perkily went on to the next news item.

"Federal, state and local authorities continue the manhunt today for two escaped convicts last seen yesterday running on foot from an abandoned car on the off ramp of Interstate 210 and the 605. It is believed that Max Kertchkow and Ollie Stanforth are attempting to elude followers by staying on the fringes of the Angeles National Forest. All roads leading into and out of the national forest are roadblocked and all campers are being warned. Kertchkow, convicted of Grand Theft and Second-Degree Murder, and Stanforth, convicted of Child Molestation and First-Degree Murder, killed two guards in their escape from a prisoner transport bus and are armed and considered very dangerous. Citizens in the area of Monrovia, Duarte and Azusa are advised to take extra precautions.

In other news..."

Roy did not notice when the hairbrush fell from Joanne's nerveless fingers. His mind was racing. Johnny and the kids were in the Coldbrook Campsite, just a few miles up Highway 39 from the Interstate area where the convicts had last been seen. He knew that he was probably overreacting, but this was Johnny, after all. He turned to look at his wife. She was staring at him, white-faced.

"I know. They're probably safe, Roy. But I want to go there. Now."

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Johnny trudged wearily along the hiking trail. It had been a long day, starting just as the first rays of

the sun pinked the eastern sky. Ollie had come to rouse them and was surprised to find Johnny still awake and wary. They had quickly been ordered to pack what was absolutely necessary and easy to carry. Max did not want the campsite to look any more abandoned than it had to. The older convict's keen mind frustrated and, he hated to admit it, scared Johnny. Max was a survivor and that made him very dangerous. Ollie was a man run by impulse and need. That made him even more dangerous.

Johnny had set a steady pace that was easy enough for the children to keep up with. A few rest periods and a break for a noon meal of trail mix and bananas were all that Max would allow, however. The only near crisis had been when poor Jennifer had voiced a need to relieve herself. Johnny had gone cold when Ollie began to follow the little girl into the nearby bushes. He had sharply ordered Chris to go watch over his sister and was surprised when Chris complied without complaint. He had the feeling that Chris was becoming aware that Ollie posed a danger to his little sister. Johnny felt a sadness at the thought that his twelve-year-old friend had to face such ugliness. It had worked, though. Ollie had altered directions and come to stand, glaring, at Johnny instead. Johnny glared right back and then turned the glare on Max, who simply shrugged.

Now the woods were beginning to take on the strange, surreal light of the gloaming. The last few minutes of muted daylight just after the sun had plunged below the horizon. Johnny usually loved this time of day but he found no enjoyment this time. Darkness was his enemy, now. Too many possibilities, too little help or hope in the dark.

The sun slipped away and the forest became increasingly murky. When Max tripped and crashed to his knees he called a halt. Chris and Jenny, reluctantly made to walk with the convict to prevent all three hostages from bolting, sank wearily to the ground and shucked their backpacks. Max rubbed his knee.

"I believe we've come as far as were going to today, Mr. Gage. How far would you say we've traveled?"

Johnny cast back into memory and mentally tallied the landmarks he had seen that day, quickly doing some calculations in his head.

"Well, I think we've come about 15 miles." He watched Max's eyebrows shoot up with disbelief. "I know that doesn't sound like much but considering the terrain were hiking in that's pretty good. From where we started at Coldbrook Camp to the Angeles Forest Highway, where I'm assuming you'd like to. . . hitch a ride, it's straight north about 50 miles as the crow flies. But we aren't crows, mister. We've had to detour around outcroppings and the deeper parts of Bear Creek. Tomorrow we have to make our way down the south side of Devil's Canyon and then turn East for awhile until we can come up again because there isn't any way up the north side otherwise. We're smack in the middle of the San Gabriel Wilderness, which is in the middle of the Angeles National Forest. This isn't going to be a day trip, mister, so get used to it."

Johnny's face had taken on a stone-faced look. He knew they were deep into the wilds, now, and his expertise was their one and only bargaining chip. He was going to use it. Max studied him in silence for a moment before turning away. Ollie, standing behind Johnny, grumbled incoherently beneath his breath. He didn't like the way the injun spoke to Max. Max deserved respect.

"Max, what you want to do fer supper? I'm awful hungry, Max. Should I have Tonto fix us something. Maybe liddle Jenny and me can go get some wood for a fire?" Ollie leered at Jenny hopefully. Johnny put out a hand and drew the little girl to him as Max quickly intervened.

"Ah, Ollie. As much as I would like to have a nice, warm, toasty fire for us and a hot meal I'm afraid that it would bring unwanted attention. No, my friend, I think we'll have to eat cold meals for awhile yet. We'll make do with the packaged foods and fruit we've packed along. Isn't it fortunate that Mr. Gage brought such suitable foods with him? And I must compliment whomever baked the brownies. They are the best thing I've eaten since I went into prison."

Supper that night was eaten in weary silence. Johnny knew he didn't have the stamina to spend another vigilant night awake and with no tent as even superficial protection he worried that the huge monster, Ollie, would make his move on Jenny under cover of darkness and fatigue. Max's assurances that he would, or could, control Ollie were flimsy at best. Johnny knew it was only a matter of time. Even if they should come all the way through to the highway unscathed, Johnny had no illusions as to their fate once Max and Ollie had no more need for them. He and Chris would die quickly. Jennifer would not be so fortunate, although she would die in the end. Johnny had one shot. He knew what it was and he knew what it would cost. He was willing to pay the price.

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The sun was just kissing the horizon when Roy pulled the car up to the roadblock leading into the park and gestured to the State Trooper standing guard.

"Sir, we have to find someone in the campsite. My partner and my children are camping here. We want to see if they are safe." Roy peered anxiously in the fading light toward the park ranger station. The Trooper glanced in and saw a tense looking woman scanning the road ahead. He looked over his shoulder and gestured to a Ranger standing next to the small entrance station.

"Dave, you have campsite assignments in there?"

The Ranger gave an affirmative nod and stepped inside to retrieve the logbook. Jogging back over to the Trooper's side he flipped it open to the most recent entries.

"Who's the campsite registered to, sir"

"John Gage. He's got two kids with him. Christopher and Jennifer DeSoto, although I doubt they'll be on the log. They checked in yesterday afternoon. We just heard about the escaped convicts on the six o'clock news. . . ." Roy realized he was rambling but he was just too nervous to reign himself in. Ranger Dave was scanning the campsite entries and when his finger stopped so did Roy. The Ranger was nodding.

"Yep. Right here. He has a site reserved for four days. Site number 13." He turned to look at the Trooper who was scratching his head.

"I can't leave my post and I don't want you folks to drive up there alone so if you can wait for five minutes I'll have another unit come up and escort you in. Mind you, I don't think you have anything to

be concerned about. We've got patrols all over the campsites for the safety of the campers who refused to leave or were unavailable when we notified them about the escape. We're more concerned with the stretch of road between here and the campsites. We think the fugitives will stick to the outskirts of the forest. The warden at the prison they were transferring from doesn't think they are the woodsy type, ya know?" He grinned and turned to his patrol car. Roy could hear him speaking over the radio with his dispatcher and waited impatiently for their escort to arrive. He turned to look at JoAnne.

"He's right, you know. I'm sure everything is fine. We'll get there and the kids will be embarrassed that we came to look for them and Johnny will think we are checking up on him. . . " He trailed off at the resolute look on his wife's face.

"I don't care how embarrassed the kids are or what Johnny thinks. I'm not leaving my children anywhere near the vicinity of a homicidal child-molester." JoAnne looked right back into Roy's eyes and saw that she really didn't have an argument on her hands. Roy was talking as much for his own benefit as hers.

A State cruiser pulled up next to them. The pair of State Troopers inside conferred momentarily with the original Trooper and the roadblock was moved aside. With a tip of the driver's hat and a smile they motioned the DeSoto's to follow them, proceeding around the barricade.

Fifteen minutes later they were pulling up to Campsite 13. Roy had originally heaved a sigh of relief at the sight of Johnny's Range Rover and tent. Now, however, he felt a sense of unease growing in his chest. The sun had dipped below the horizon and, although there were a few vestiges of light in the sky, it was swiftly approaching the point where it was too dark to still be out hiking. Yet here they were at Johnny's campsite with no Johnny, no kids, no campfire or supper smells. JoAnne began calling for her children. Roy and the older of the two Troopers, Jake, walked toward the dead campfire. Stoney, the younger Trooper, wandered around the perimeter of the site. Stooping by the fire Roy cautiously lowered his hand towards the ashes. He found them cool on top and slightly warm below the surface but with no large chunks of charcoal banked and glowing under the ashes. His heart sank even further. Turning to Jake he sighed.

"This fire burned out sometime in the early hours this morning. I find it hard to believe that Johnny wouldn't have started it up again this morning for coffee and a hot meal for the kids. He likes to cook over the campfire."

Jake was looking at Roy with a bewildered expression. "How can you tell that? You some kind of woods guide or something?"

Roy snorted. "No, I don't really like camping, to tell you the truth. I'm a firefighter/paramedic. So's my partner. After years of fighting fires you learn how they work." Standing, he looked around carefully at what was at the site and, more importantly, what wasn't there. Striding to the back of Johnny's Land Rover, Roy scrutinized the interior contents carefully. When he noticed the rappelling ropes Johnny always kept in the back were missing, he knew. Face ashen, Roy turned back to find Jake.

"We've got trouble."

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"Get over here, Tonto."

Max gestured impatiently to Johnny. Weary and sore from two days on the run, Max knew he wasn't going to be able to keep an eye on his belligerent hostage. Ollie wasn't used to this kind of exercise, either. Johnny eyed Max uncertainly but made no move to comply. He knew what was going to happen. He wouldn't be able to protect Jennifer if he was trussed up like a turkey.

"I don't think so, mister. I've never been into bondage. Don't feel like starting now. If you absolutely have to you can tie my foot to Jennifer's. Can't very well run that way, now can I?" Johnny fingered his sore jaw and hoped Max would see it his way. He hoped wrong.

"Ollie."

Max's word was enough to spring Ollie into happy action. Grabbing Johnny by one arm he hauled him up. Johnny let him and even helped him with a boost of his feet . . . and a fist into the underside of Ollie's jaw. He heard the snap of Ollie's teeth as they clacked together and felt his head snap back. The giant stumbled back a step or two as Johnny whirled to face Max. The little convict was waiting for him, however, with the gun shoved into Chris's ear. The boy's face was white with fear.

"I thought you might try something like that, Mr. Gage. Why do you think I keep these lovely children so nice and handy all the time. Ollie, truss him up for the night, would you?" A feral smile danced across Max's face.

Ollie's mouth was bleeding and he paused to spit out a tooth.

"You stinkin' injun! You made me bleed!" Swinging a roundhouse punch he caught Johnny squarely in the stomach and watched in satisfaction as the hostage doubled over with a "Uuhhng!" and desperately tried to suck in oxygen. Quickly taking advantage of the paramedic's incapacitation he shoved Johnny to the ground and had him bound hand and foot within a matter of minutes. Chris watched helplessly. He had never known such a combination of hate and fear in his young life. Nothing in reality had ever prepared him for this. Jennifer sobbed quietly from behind Max. She didn't want her Uncle Johnny hurt any more. She wanted to go home and she wanted her Mother and Father.

Johnny felt a wave of despair wash over him. The odds of all of them getting out of this alive were dwindling by the moment. He could not know that just 15 miles away statements were being taken, swarms of investigators were combing the campgrounds and search teams were being organized for first light.

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Christopher DeSoto listened to the sounds of the forest. He had camped with his Uncle Johnny before but never out in the open like this, lying on the hard earth in the middle of the wilderness. Even as exhausted as he was it was hard to find sleep. Although it was late summer, here in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains the nights grew cool. He had reluctantly accepted Johnny's jacket and, with his backpack for a pillow, was crowding as close to Jennifer as humanly possible.

Johnny had made a "Jennifer sandwich", as he jokingly tried to call it. With Johnny's hands tied

behind his back and his feet firmly bound he lay on his side facing Chris. Between them the little eight-year-old had quickly dropped off, weary from a long day's forced march. He had then beseeched the tired boy to take the jacket and spread it over both children and to put his arm over his little sister.

"Keep it there all night if you can, Chris. It's important. Can you do that for me?"

Chris had been a bit bewildered by the request but had nodded agreement and settled down to try to find sleep. Eventually he heard the steady breathing of their two captors and squirmed a bit trying to find a comfortable spot on the hard ground. He could only imagine how uncomfortable it was for Johnny to lie on one arm all night. As if Johnny had heard his thoughts a whispered voice came softly out of the darkness.

"Chris? Chris, are you awake?"

"Yea, are you OK, Uncle Johnny?" Chris raised his head slightly to look over Jennifer. Johnny's eyes were gleaming back at him through the little moonlight that penetrated the foliage.

"Chris, we need to talk." Johnny shifted a bit, trying to work his way off of a sharp pebble. "I think you know that we are in big trouble."

"Yea. I kinda got that idea" Chris paused for a moment. "They're going to kill us, aren't they?"

Johnny was surprised at the matter of fact tone the boy had used. He had been dreading this talk. To force a twelve-year-old to face such harsh realities went against every nurturing instinct he had but Johnny was going to have to push Chris DeSoto into adulthood to save his life and that of his sister.

"Yes, Chris, I think so. But not until they've gotten everything they need from us first." Johnny sighed. "I think I have a way, though, for you to get yourself and Jennifer away."

"What? We can get away? Wait a minute." Chris frowned. "What do you mean me and Jenny? What about you? We're not going without you!" he hissed.

"Chris, you're going to have to. I can't go and you have to get your sister to safety! You are her older brother and it's up to you to do this!" In spite of his fear for Chris and Jenny, Johnny was surprised and incredibly proud of Chris's desire to stay with him despite knowing the likely outcome.

"I can't, Uncle Johnny! Don't make me leave you behind! We'll find a way for all of us to escape!" Christopher was almost sobbing now. Johnny shushed him and gave him a moment to settle down. After a few minutes he forced himself to press on, to push the world's ugliness upon a child he loved.

"Chris, how much do you know about. . . uh. . . um. . . about sex?"

Christopher was thrown for a mental loop and struggled for a moment to rearrange his thinking. Feeling like this was an important question of some sort he decided to answer honestly. "Uh, pretty much, I think. I mean," he hastened to add, "I haven't ever, like, kissed a girl or anything but Ernie Stanley told me a whole bunch of stuff at Captain Stanley's picnic last month and he's 16, you know." He couldn't see Johnny in the dark but he could almost hear his mouth drop open then.

"Ernie. . . Stanley. . . told you. . . uh. . . never mind. So you know what a guy does with. . .?"

"Uh, yea."

"And with a woman. . .? "

"Yea." Chris felt himself blushing in the darkness and suspected he wasn't the only one. He wondered what Johnny wanted with all this.

"Chris," Johnny began hesitantly, "usually sex is a beautiful thing between two adults. Sometimes, though, you get a person who is all twisted up inside and they see it as an act of power over someone. Ollie is like that." Johnny let silence settle for a moment to give the young man a chance to absorb the implications. The voice that finally answered him out of the darkness was soft and sad. Older, somehow, than it had been only minutes before.

"Ollie wants to do things with Jennifer, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"She's too little!"

"I know."

"And when he's done, he'll kill her?" It may have been stated as a question but Chris's voice betrayed the fact that he already knew the answer.

"Yes, but not quickly or easily." Johnny closed his eyes and sighed inwardly. He hated himself for what he was doing. "And we'll die, too, when I've taken Max as far as he wants to go. I can't bear the thought of watching both of you die, Chris. I can't do it. You have to take Jenny and go. I'll tell you how but you have to promise me you'll get her to safety." He was forcing a man's promise on a twelve-year-old. He felt like throwing up.

A small silence lay between them for a moment. Johnny could hear Chris's struggle not to break down and sob. Finally, in a very small voice, so soft that Johnny almost missed it, Christopher DeSoto agreed to abandon a loved one to a lonely death.

"I promise."

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JoAnne DeSoto had never felt emptier in her life. She sat in the Ranger Station, now a Command Center, and felt oblivious to the controlled chaos around her. Stoney, the young Trooper who had helped her search the campsite earlier, had insisted she take a hot cup of coffee some time ago. She still held it, untouched and cold, in nerveless fingers. Vaguely, as if from a great distance, she could hear Roy arguing with Jake about the planned search and rescue operation in the morning.

"I'm a trained Rescue Man! I'm also a certified Paramedic. I'm going." The tight control in Roy's voice was almost painful to listen to.

"Listen, Roy, I know you want to help. I would, too. I haven't got clearance for you to be on one of the search teams. And you wouldn't be able to go with any of the parties searching South of here. Two miles from here LA County ends and San Bernadino County begins. You're only certified in this county." Jake shook his head in frustration. "I know how you feel, Roy, but. . . "

"No....., you don't know how I feel. You get clearance and I'll stay with the teams searching in this county. But I am going, with the teams or by myself, so you'd better find a way to make it happen." Roy's haggard face was set, his voice quiet but resolute. His mind was made up. Jake sighed, then nodded and turned to the phone.

JoAnne registered the conversation in the back of her mind as something that should interest her but didn't. That fact bothered her for a fleeting second and then was gone. She simply couldn't feel anything at the moment except overwhelming fear and loss. Despair crowded close on the heels of those two emotions. She finally raised her head when it registered that Roy had been kneeling in front of her for several moments. She looked into his worried eyes.

"I want my babies back, Roy."

Roy closed his eyes for a moment as if steeling himself. "I know, Baby, I know. So do I. We'll find them. You have to believe that. Why don't I call Emily Stanley to come and get you?" JoAnne shook her head frantically.

"NO, Roy, I'm not leaving here until I have my babies back! Johnny promised he'd take care of them. He PROMISED! I should never have let them go." JoAnne knew she was being unreasonable but she couldn't help herself. She wanted something, anything, to help her make sense of this nightmare. "I'll never forgive him if something happens to my children, Roy. Never."

Roy gently took her hands. "Sweetheart, you know Johnny would do anything to keep those kids safe. He loves them. He'll do his best, Jo. I sure of it."

"Well, his best hasn't been very good so far, has it!! Where are my children, Roy?! I want them back and safe and in my arms and. . . " Her breath caught on a sob and suddenly she could feel again. Everything. In one big rush the days events came crashing down on her and she found herself in Roy's arms, weeping as if the world were ending. Which, for her, it was. Head buried in Roy's shoulder she sobbed wildly.

"He.... he promised....."

\* \* \* \* \*

The plan had been very simple, really, after Johnny explained it to Chris. At a certain spot in Devil's Canyon there was a ravine. It had been passable as a way to the top of the canyon until just a year or two ago when a small earthquake had tumbled rocks into one section of it. Now there was only a small opening left that led through the rocks. Way too small for a man to get through . . . but large enough for two slender children. When they reached the ravine Johnny planned to call a halt to tie the laces of his hiking boots, which he would conveniently step on to untie. While the two men were keeping a watch on him Chris would slip his backpack off and, holding Jennifer's hand, slip up into

the ravine. If they were noticed, Johnny would hold the two men back as best he could until Chris could send Jenny up through the hole and then, pushing his backpack in front of him, follow her through. Once through he was to turn to his left and find Mt. Wilson, which would be clearly visible above the trees almost all the time. It would be a good days walk for the two children but at the base of Mt. Wilson directly in their line of walking, there was the Devour campgrounds and Ranger Station.

Johnny stirred and opened his eyes. Morning had come too early for his tired mind but seemed too long in coming for his aching body. Faint traces of purple were just beginning to tinge the eastern sky when he nudged Jennifer, still cocooned safely between her brother and Uncle.

"Sweetie, I need you to wake up. C'mon, Jenny-pie." Johnny's murmuring voice slowly roused the young girl from dreams of warm beds and Mommy's singing. Chris stirred as well and cracked his eyes open. He quickly glanced over to see if their captors had begun to rouse and was satisfied that the long, unaccustomed march of the previous day was still exerting a toll.

Johnny took in two sets of sleep-filled but suddenly alert eyes and leaned in as far as possible. His voice, earnest and soft, plead with the children.

"Jennifer, I have something very, very important to ask of you. It's the most important thing I will ever ask you to do." He paused a moment to see if she was paying close attention. When she nodded, he continued. "Chris is going to help you get away today and go back to your Mom and Dad. We have to do this very secretly and quietly. When it's time to go Chris will tell you what to do and I want you to promise me you will obey him completely, with no questions and no arguing, until you are back with your parents. Can you do that for me, Hon?"

The little girl gazed deep into Johnny's eyes before whispering, "Yes, Johnny."

Now came a more difficult task for Johnny. "Now one more promise, from both of you. When it is time to go you might hear some. . . fighting and other noises behind you. You are not to look back or try to come back, under any condition. This is very important, understand? Do not come back for me. Keep going until you get to the Ranger Station." This last he directed straight at Chris. Both children's eyes were wide and apprehensive but they nodded solemn agreement.

They heard a stirring from the two sleeping convicts and quickly closed their eyes, pretending sleep. Johnny could hear the large Ollie rising and moving toward them. When Ollie leaned over them Johnny snapped his eyes open and glared straight into the surprised eyes of the pedophile.

"Morning, Ollie. Out for a jog before breakfast?"

The hulking Ollie snarled and gave the bound man a kick in the shins. "Time to wake, injun. Max says we need to git movin'." Bending swiftly he loosened the knots restraining Johnny's hands and feet then moved back to where the elder escapee was trying to shake the sleep drowse from his eyes. Able to move for the first time in several hours, Johnny tried to pull his arm out from beneath him. He couldn't feel it. His legs were cramped and sore. Gingerly sitting up he felt the first rush of blood back into his numb limbs and sucked in a hiss. Jenny was there immediately. Concern in her eyes.

"Pins and needles, Uncle Johnny?"

He laughed at her simple explanation. "More like pokers and knives, Sweetie. Could you give Chris my pack. I don't think I can pick it up just now and he needs to get some things out of it for breakfast." Johnny continued to rub his arm and legs, trying to restore circulation enough to be able to move again. The pain was almost excruciating but he wasn't about to let the children know that. It would pass soon enough. He watched as Chris rummaged about in the paramedics pack, ostensibly looking for the fruit bars which were to serve as their breakfast, but surreptitiously transferring trail mix, water and an extra sweatshirt into his own pack. Ollie and Max paid the boy no mind. Both intent on keeping an eye on either Johnny or Jenny. The lanky paramedic kept it that way by getting up and trying to move about a little, explaining that he needed to get the kinks out before the set out for the day. Behind the two escaped prisoners a boy was preparing himself for a man's task.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake had personally attached himself to Roy. If he was going to vouch for the driven paramedic he was going to make damn good and sure that Roy wasn't going to do anything foolish. True to his word, Roy chose one of the teams working their way north across the LA county section of Angeles National Park. Something just whispered to Roy that Johnny would stay in the county if at all possible. Some measure of relief had been gained by both distraught parents when no evidence of blood or foul play had been found at the campsite. Only backpacks, food and bare essentials were missing, as if Johnny and the kids had gone for a day of hiking. If it weren't for the sets of prison issue boot prints in and around the campsite Roy could almost make himself believe that. All traces of the missing party had disappeared a scant few yards from the site. Too much vegetation and too many other campers had obscured any trace of the fleeing prisoners and their hostages.

Jake had explained that dogs were being flown in but it would be a least 24 hours before they would be there and acclimated enough to be of any use. Roy didn't even want to think of them being needed 24 hours from now.

Spread out in a long line the searchers brought in for the task were experienced man hunters. Stretched across a section plotted out on a map they were just within sight of each other. Because of the large area that had to be covered it was impossible to fill out the roster of searchers with all law enforcement personnel. Other search and rescue personnel had been recruited and interspersed evenly with armed local, state and federal authorities. Even off-duty firefighters, when the word had gone out over the newscasts, had volunteered. Jake walked just within sight to Roy's left while Stoney walked a ways off to his right. On the far side of Stoney, Roy knew that Chet was keeping a keen eye peeled for any signs of passage by the wanted felons. They had strict orders to quietly get the attention of armed personnel if they found anything or caught sight of something out of the ordinary. Helicopters whirred their noisy way overhead in their own search patterns. The odds of the noisy choppers catching site of wary people in the dense growth was slim but nonetheless helpful. Roy's thread thin restraint on his psyche would have snapped had he known that the helicopters were best used to find items that lay out in the open and not liable to dart under cover. Like bodies.

\* \* \* \* \*

Johnny ran his hand back through his mop of heavy, black, unruly hair and tried to steady himself. The opening to the ravine was just up ahead and he freely admitted to himself for the first time that he

was terrified. He didn't know if he was going to live past the next few minutes. He was more fearful, however, of what would happen if he didn't go through with his plan. If he lived through this experience but let the children come to harm he would be dead anyway. In every way that counted.

It was time to set things in motion. He casually looked down toward his feet and timed the motions just right. His left foot brushed against his right and caught the shoestring he had deliberately tied loosely. The shoestring snagged beneath his boot and unraveled. He continued walking.

When Johnny was directly across from the entrance to the ravine he paused and looked down.

"Hold up. I've got to tie my boot." He watched carefully as Ollie came up beside him followed by Max and the children. He glanced at Chris, catching his eye and winked. He could only spare a second but in that time he tried to store up one last memory of Roy's kids. They were both dirty and disheveled but beautiful to his eyes. Chris had a scared yet determined look in his eyes, grown older this past day. Jennifer was solemn. Her braid was more undone than done and she had a hole in one knee of her jeans but childhood still shown in her face. That was all that mattered to Johnny. That fact alone was enough to keep him moving to the next step.

"What's a matter, Ollie? You've never seen someone tie a shoestring before? Well, I'll tell you how it goes so you can do it alllll by yourself next time. See. You make a big loop, then you take the other string and go aroooooound the loop. . . ." Johnny saw that he had both the convict's attention. Ollie had taken a menacing step toward him and was turning red in the face. Max was stepping forward to break up any potential problems. Chris had slipped his backpack off and was holding it in one hand. Now he clamped onto Jenny's hand and they both began stepping quietly backwards toward the ravine entrance.

". . . and tuck it through the laces and pull it through. See how that makes a pretty little bow, Ollie? Maybe when you grow up Max won't have to tie your shoes for you, now will he?"

Ollie was beet red by now. "You think you're so smart, Tonto. You won't be laughin' so hard when we git to the highway. And you won't keep little missy so safe either!"

Max quickly put a restraining hand on the big man's arm. He couldn't afford to let Ollie go off just yet. They needed this brash young man to get them through this godforsaken forest. Johnny grinned arrogantly up into Ollie's rage filled face. His peripheral vision showed the two children at the entrance to the ravine and slipping farther in. He didn't dare look at them directly. Max pondered this sudden baiting on Johnny's part and felt alarm bells suddenly go off. Whipping his head about the little man scanned the area for the children.

"Where are the children?!" was all Max had a chance to squeeze out before Johnny's flying tackle caught Ollie square in the stomach and forced him back into his smaller companion.

"RUN!"

The one word warning shout was all the wiry paramedic could manage as he sent all three men into a tangled pile. Chris heard and, pulling his sister behind him, sprinted up the rocky wash as fast as he dared. He could see the boulder dam that had blocked the ravine just ahead of them. Urging his sister

on he breathlessly explained to her that he needed her to crawl through the hole he showed her as fast as she could. She nodded in wide-eyed terror and pumped her smaller legs in an effort to keep up. Skidding to a halt before the hole, Jennifer quickly dropped to her knees and began to scuttle forward. Chris heard footsteps pounding up the wash towards them and wasted no time in dropping the backpack down and shoving it into the hole. Behind him he could hear the sickening sounds of flesh hitting flesh accompanied by primal grunts and cries. Flopping onto his belly and pushing the pack before him he began to worm his way into the hole.

"Jenny! Go! Go! Go!" He could hear a man's fast panting now as well as the flap-flap of shoes hitting the rocks. He tried to squirm faster. He could see his sister just in front of him. He was almost through when he felt a hand clutch desperately onto his foot. Chris felt himself slide backwards several inches, his hands scrabbling at the dirt in front of him. Panic rose in his throat and he felt like he was choking. In that instant his shoe slipped from his foot and he was free. Scrambling frantically he shot forward and was out.

Chris didn't waste any time. He was too afraid not to. He once again took possession of his sister's hand and began to lead her the rest of the way up the ravine. She followed but more reluctantly now.

"Chris! They're hurting Uncle Johnny! I can hear them fighting!" She sobbed quietly to herself as Chris gritted his teeth and clamped down on his own emotions.

"I know, Jenny. But you heard what Uncle Johnny said. No matter what we hear we're suppose to get to Mom and Dad. We have to. Don't you see? If we can find help maybe we can rescue him." He looked down at his little sister. The sister whom he loved to tease and fight with but who now seemed more precious than gold to him. She was wiping her grubby face with an even grubbier fist and nodding.

"Yes. Let's get somebody to help Uncle Johnny. Let's hurry, Chris." They had come to the top of the ravine now and Chris looked to his left. Johnny had explained that Mount Wilson had a funny looking top, almost like an old man looking off toward Mexico. Chris spotted it right away.

"This way, Jen. Uncle Johnny said if we go toward that mountain we will run straight into a campground with a Ranger Station. Let's go." Taking the lead, one foot shoeless, the young man began to lead his sister to safety.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a nuthatch singing somewhere of love and life and 'come look at my pretty nest'. Johnny found this very disconcerting. As he swam his way back towards consciousness his world consisted of pain, confusion and the struggle to draw in a breath. Obviously this wasn't heaven as he had first thought. At least his version of heaven didn't hold any pain. Johnny's last memory was of Ollie's large hands around his throat, slowly and inexorably squeezing the life out of him. He groaned and tried to force his eyes open. Only one complied. The other seemed to be swelled shut. Gradually the vision cleared in his one good eye and Max's disapproving features loomed above him.

"Welcome back, Mr. Gage. That was a very nasty stunt you pulled on us and I have to admit that I almost let Ollie finish his task of strangling you. Unfortunately, we still need you." Max's face twisted

into a distasteful frown.

Johnny pulled himself painfully to a sitting position and tried to take stock of his condition. There was quite a bit of blood saturating his tee shirt, which at first alarmed the paramedic. Exploring with timid fingers he discovered a nasty gash just below his right eyebrow. That certainly accounted for the swelling around that eye and the pounding headache but certainly not for the quantity of blood covering him and soaking into the ground around him. He could taste the coppery tang of blood in his mouth; felt it as it slipped down his throat and discovered that his nose was bleeding heavily down the front of his white tee shirt. It showed no signs of stopping soon but as near as Johnny could determine it was not broken. His lips were split again, more so than before, and his tongue detected several gashes on the inside of his mouth where Ollie's fists had connected with his teeth. Several bruises and abrasions were screaming for attention from various parts of his body and several ribs felt cracked, one perhaps broken. The injury that bothered him the most, at the moment, was his throat. The near strangulation had left his neck and windpipe bruised and swollen. Already he suspected there were handprints discoloring the skin of his neck and it was somewhat of an effort to breathe. Johnny hoped that problem would subside after a while.

Glancing up he caught sight of Ollie. The big man's nose was very obviously broken and swollen to a large degree. Blood had flowed down the front of his shirt, too, and two black rings now graced both his eyes. Johnny noted with satisfaction that he was moving somewhat tenderly as well and seemed to be favoring his stomach region.

"You look like a 'coon, Ollie. It suits you." Johnny couldn't resist. It just popped out. A grin had tried to make it's way onto his face but the pain of his split lips quickly quelled that idea. Max's face took on the look of a thundercloud.

"That will be quite enough, Mr. Gage. You have managed to take away my trump card over you but I warn you, you will complete your task. I know you are not stupid, Mr. Gage, and I'm sure you have figured out what is waiting for you at the end of your journey. You have a choice, however, of making this a swift and easy ending or a long, slow and painful one. Think on this, Mr. Gage. And if you cause myself or my companion any more trouble I'm sure I can convince Ollie, here, to forego his predilection for little girls and satisfy his needs in other ways. We were, after all, in prison, where such things are common. Do I make myself perfectly clear, Mr. Gage?" Max's eyes bore into John's and watched as the paramedic's face drained of color.

"Perfectly." Johnny whispered.

Max nodded in satisfaction and gestured to the sulking Ollie.

"My friend, please bind Mr. Gage's hands. I don't think we can trust him, do you? Oh, and leash him as well."

Ollie stepped forward and, cutting a short length of the rope taken from John's Land Rover he bound the protesting man's hands behind his back. Then, taking a long length of rope, he slipped it under Johnny's arms and around his chest. The convict then knotted it painfully tight across the front of Johnny's sternum, flipped the two ends back over the paramedic's shoulders and tucked them under the rope again. This made a very effective harness with two long reins which the big man gathered up.

Ollie loved the sudden look of panic in the paramedic's eyes.

"Good doggy. Now you go on and sniff us out a trail." Ollie grinned maliciously and gave the hostage a little nudge. John bowed his head and slowly set off.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chet, holding two steaming cups of coffee, moved to sit next to Roy. Their search team, halting for a 30-minute break, was making use of the time to down cups of the stimulating drink and wolf down sandwiches. Roy accepted the coffee, but waved away the food. He knew he wouldn't be able to keep it down. Chet sat down silently beside his friend. He couldn't even begin to imagine what Roy was going through. It was hard enough for Chet to think of a friend in mortal danger much less the children, too.

"Roy, Johnny and the kids. . . they'll be all right. You gotta believe that." Chet struggled for the right words. It was hard, though, when he doubted them himself. It had been devastating to see JoAnne this morning in Emily Stanley's arms weeping for her children. It was harder still to see this silent, stoic version of Roy who moved like an automaton.

Both men looked up as their team leader approached. He was accompanied by an expert search and rescue man from the F.B.I. Both halted before Roy and he was handed a white hair ribbon covered with yellow happy faces.

"We found this while scouting out the trail up ahead. Does it look familiar?"

Roy held the bit of cloth tenderly between his fingers and nodded mutely. Despair and elation warred for dominance on his face. His daughter was indeed in the hands of madmen. They were, however, on the right track.

At that very moment the owner of the lost hair ribbon was attempting to get a rock out of her shoe.

"Chris, how much longer are we going to be in these trees. Are there any bears in the woods? Do you think they eat little girls? I hope we get to the campsite soon because I'm getting really tired of eating trail mix. I want a McDonald's hamburger, that's what I want. With lots of french fries and ketchup and a big chocolate shake. Doesn't that sound yummy, Chris? What do you want?" The little girl chattered on. Her big brother ignored her and continued to scan the surrounding area. Even though he knew they were probably beyond any danger from Max and Ollie he couldn't let himself relax his vigilance. The stakes were too high. He once again found his bearings on Mt. Wilson. He didn't know if they would be able to make the campground by dark and the thought of staying out here in the wilderness without Johnny frightened him more than he wanted to admit. He rubbed his shoeless foot. It was becoming more painful as the day wore on. Stone bruises covered the sole but he tried to ignore the discomfort. He couldn't be a whiny baby anymore. He was responsible for Jenny now and if Uncle Johnny could take a beating for them he could put up with bruises on his foot. With a sigh he rose and the two children set off once more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Johnny stumbled and went to his knees yet again. With his hands tied behind him he couldn't maintain his balance. Earlier, during the course of their climb out of the eastern end of Devil's Canyon, he had fallen numerous times. The knees of his jeans were shredded, as was the skin beneath them. In some places, where he had fallen on rock, the gashes were deep enough to see the white bone of the kneecap underneath. Every fall drove dirt and debris deeper into the wounds until he felt his knees beginning to swell with infection. He knew it wouldn't be long before he became feverish. A tug on the 'leash' around his chest brought him out of his reverie.

"C'mon, Tonto. Be a good dog and get movin'" Ollie was really enjoying his role as tether holder. His frequent tugs on the rope around Johnny's already sore ribs kept the paramedic's anger at a slow simmer. Which was better than creeping despair, Johnny mused. He climbed painfully to his feet once again and set off in a north/northwesterly direction. They were going to have to cross Adler Creek soon and he hoped the icy stream was low this year. He didn't relish the idea of being swept away with his hands bound behind him.

Two hours later found the trio, wet and cold from the creek crossing, looking for a place to stop for the night. Max and Ollie had discussed the possibility of a fire and, after some arguing, finally agreed on having a small one if for no other reason than to dry themselves out and warm up. Finally choosing what he hoped would be a fairly smooth and secluded site, Max ordered a stop for the night. The sun was fast approaching the horizon and they would need the last few minutes of daylight to gather wood.

"Ollie, please leash Mr. Gage for the night and find us some dry wood. I shall see what we have in the way of food left in our packs." Max rummaged around and came up with more of JoAnne's brownies, trail mix and two apples as Ollie looped the ends of his rope high up on a tree limb and secured them. This left the tether loose enough to allow Johnny some freedom of movement.

Johnny could care less. He was exhausted, cold, wet and now feverish. His hands had been numb for hours. Carefully sliding down the trunk of the tree and onto the ground he curled himself into a shivering ball and looked up at the stars that were just beginning to glimmer in the post sunset light. Within minutes he was asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chris was beginning to panic. It was almost completely dark now and they hadn't reached the Devour Campground yet. He didn't want to spend the night out here alone. The forest was cooling quickly now that the sun was down so they paused to dig out Johnny's sweatshirt which Chris then insisted that Jenny wear. While she struggled to pull it on Chris peered through the forest frantically. He was almost ready to give up and suggest they stop right here for the night when he thought he spied a light gleaming through the trees some ways off in the distance. He stared harder. It was!

"Jen! I think I see something! See? Over there. Do you see it? Do you think that's the campground? It has to be! Let's keep going."

Jennifer nodded wearily and took Christopher's hand. She had run out of chatter several hours ago and just wanted to sleep now. She, too, had no desire to sleep out here in the dark, however, and forced herself to place one small foot in front of the other. She clung tightly to her brother's hand now. He

seemed so different than the irritating boy she had known just two short days ago. Now she didn't want him out of her sight. They trudged on wearily for what seemed a small eternity. The light continued to get larger and brighter, though, and that gave them the will to keep walking.

Somewhere around eleven p.m., California time, two very weary children trudged out of the forest and onto the streetlight illuminated surface of the Devour Campground parking lot. Chris spotted the Ranger Station right away and was intensely relieved to see not one, but two cars pulled up next to it. One belonged to a State Trooper.

\* \* \* \* \*

Weary men gathered around camp lanterns in cold camps in a line all across the Angeles National Forest. The search teams heading toward the South had been radioed and called back to join their northbound counterparts after Roy had confirmed the hair ribbon. The discovery had also been radioed to the temporary command post but Roy had had no word on how JoAnne had received the news. He was told that she was with a Crisis Councilor when the news came in. State Troopers were patrolling the Angeles Forest Highway now, as well, with the revised opinion that the convicts had indeed set out across the forest and would try to hitch a ride at the highway.

Roy leaned against a tree and tried to make sense out of the last day and a half. He knew that for Johnny and his kids this would be their third night in the company of convicted killers. He tried not to dwell on the possibilities but they were just too determined to haunt him. Chet was sitting with his back against the same tree, wrapped in a sleeping bag and trying not to fall asleep on Roy. Stoney, on the other side of Roy, snored peacefully. That was precisely what they were supposed to be doing but Chet felt obligated to try and keep Roy company. He wondered if he would be in trouble for not showing up for his shift tomorrow but there was no way he could leave Roy alone during this. He knew that Mike, Marco and Cap were on some of the other search teams during their off shifts but he hadn't seen or heard from them.

Chet heard the squawking of the team leader's radio some distance away and wondered vaguely what it could be about but at the moment he was almost too tired to care. Until he heard feet pounding in their direction.

"Roy! Roy DeSoto!"

The team leader's shout roused the entire search team. Roy and Chet tensed. It was possible that the worst moment of Roy's life was now upon him.

"The Trooper over at Devour Campground just radioed in. He said two kids just stumbled in, a boy and a girl. The boy said his name was Christopher DeSoto!!"

The surrounding men erupted into wild shouts of triumph. The sound seemed to be coming from a great distance off to Roy as he tried to absorb the news. Suddenly he shot to his feet.

"Take me there. NOW!!!"

The team leader simply nodded and called for a helicopter airlift. Chet stood up, determined to go

with Roy. He didn't say anything to Roy just yet but he had noticed immediately that there was no mention of Johnny.

\* \* \* \* \*

After hauling the two firefighters up on safety lines the chopper raced off toward the temporary command post and set down. The pilot didn't even have to shut the engine down for JoAnne DeSoto was there before he had time to register her presence. Jake, who had been called back to the command center that afternoon, flung open the door and assisted the frantic woman into the vehicle before climbing in himself. Roy found himself with an armful of wife as she flung her arms around him and cried with a mixture of joy and fear.

"They're alive Roy! They're alive!! Oh, please God, let them be all right!" She clung tightly to him as the helicopter rose once again and sped off into the night.

The were on the ground again within 15 minutes and, bending low to avoid the deadly rotor blades, raced across the parking lot of Devour Campground, Jake and Chet close on their heels. When they burst into the Ranger Station the first sight that met their eyes were two bedraggled, blanket wrapped children being attended to solicitously by a Park Ranger and two State Troopers. Nothing in Roy or Joanne's life had ever looked so beautiful.

Both children swept the blankets aside and sprang into their parent's outstretched arms. Everyone was weeping. Even the total strangers. JoAnne couldn't kiss her babies fast enough. The kisses were interspersed with proclamations of love and moments of holding each dirty child out to see if they were actually in front of her, in her arms.

"Jenny, are you all right, sweetie! Oh, baby, you're so cold!! Christopher, you're limping! Roy, he's limping! Look at his foot! Oh God, are you hurt? Are either of you hurt?" JoAnne was distraught at the thought of either child being harmed. Roy was quickly checking both children over with a practiced eye.

"Dad, Mom, we're fine. I've just got bruises on the bottom of my foot. I lost my shoe." Chris reassured them.

Suddenly Roy's face clouded over. Contrary to what Chet had thought, he had noticed the omission in the radio report. He asked quietly.

"Chris, where's. . . where's Johnny?"

Jennifer immediately burst into tears and JoAnne gathered her quickly into her arms, looking at Roy with renewed alarm. Jennifer sobbed brokenheartedly.

"The bad men were hurting him, Mommy! He said to get away and not come back but I wanted to 'cause we could hear them hurting Uncle Johnny real bad! They're really, really mean, see?" And with that she raised her arm and pulled up the sleeve of the oversized sweatshirt to reveal the bloodstained sleeve of her shirt. JoAnne gasped.

"Is that your blood, Jenny? Are you hurt?"

"No, Mommy! Ollie hit Uncle Johnny in the mouth and hurt him and I wiped the blood off." The little girl's voice took on an angry tone. "He was mean, Daddy, and I want you to shoot him!! He wanted to touch me and Uncle Johnny wouldn't let him." Roy and JoAnne let out an inward sigh as Jennifer answered one of the questions uppermost on their minds. Roy went on.

"Chris, I think you'd better tell us everything you can, and make sure the officers, here, know as much as you can tell them, too." Roy was beginning to have a very bad feeling about the outcome of this rescue.

An hour later, with Jennifer curled up and sleeping safely in her mother's arms, Chris finished his story. Roy, JoAnne and Chet were having a hard time concealing their dismay at the events that had unfolded. JoAnne, especially, was looking at Roy with haunted, guilt-filled eyes. The boy held nothing back from his distressed parents, even down to the conversation he and Johnny had had about sex. Roy was amazed at the courage and responsibility his son had shown, but also saddened by his loss of innocence. Chris's voice echoed with weary despair.

"I didn't want to leave him, Dad. He watched over us, especially Jennifer, and kept that big goon off of her and we just left him there. Ollie was beating the crap out of him when we escaped. We could hear it. I don't even know if he's still alive, Dad! I . . . I don't know. . . " Christopher finally gave in to his emotions after holding them in so tightly. He was safe now. Back in his father's arms. Johnny had told him he had to keep his promise to be responsible only until he was back with his parents. Well, he was now. And he had fulfilled his promise. He flung himself into his father's arms and wept.

\* \* \* \* \*

Johnny awoke with the help of Ollie's boot to the small of his back.

"Hey, Tonto! Git'cher ass up. It's time to be movin' again."

Johnny sluggishly pulled his one good eye open and tried to orient himself. Like a movie with trick photography his vision seemed blurred and wavery around the edges. His face felt stiff and sticky. His mouth tasted of old blood. Looking toward the ground beside him, Johnny realized that his nose had bled again, profusely, during the night and had left the dirt beside his face soaked. Ollie may not have broken his nose the previous day but Johnny was sure he had ruptured a blood vessel in his sinus somewhere.

//Looks like I need to stop in the body shop and top off the fluids. Bet I'm at least a quart low.// John suddenly had an insane urge to giggle. He knew his lightheadedness was a symptom of many problems; exhaustion, fever, dehydration, lack of food, and blood loss but that didn't stop the urge to laugh. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on how one wanted to look at the situation, a deep breath quelled the urge quickly enough. Sharp pains stabbed through his chest and he was suddenly wracked by a fit of coughing.

//Great. Just f\*\*\*in' great. Cracked ribs and now the beginnings of pneumonia. Guess it's a good thing Max is going to put me out of my misery pretty soon. Won't have to worry about a long stay at

Rampart.// Johnny sighed in resignation and looked up at the large convict looming over him. He was holding the end of Johnny's 'leash' and waiting for Johnny to get up. Johnny looked down at his shredded knees, now swollen to at least twice their normal size, hot and weeping infection. He grimaced.

"Ollie, I hate to say this, but if you want me on my feet you're going to have to pull me up. Unless you want to untie my hands, that is?" Johnny questioned hopefully. He regretted the suggestion immediately. Ollie bent at the waist and, laying two massive hands around Johnny's arms, hauled the injured paramedic roughly to his feet. Johnny let loose a hoarse cry. Bending his knees was more excruciating than he had thought possible. They immediately began to bleed again, seeping down over his already stiff jeans. A milky yellow suppuration also oozed from the ravaged flesh. The pain left John gasping.

"Damn, Ollie! Next time I'll do it myself!" The man in question just grinned maliciously and moved back over to Max. John muttered under his breath.

"Asshole." Another fit of wet, painful coughing followed the word. When the episode had passed a spent and gasping Johnny was surprised to find Max holding their one remaining water canteen in front of him.

"I think you had better have a little, Mr. Gage. We have some distance to go yet, I believe?" Max's voice was all false solicitousness. Although his stomach turned at the thought of forcing anything down his bruised and swollen throat, Johnny knew he was getting seriously dehydrated. He forced a few sips down.

"We should hit the highway by late today." John answered in a raspy voice. "You can save yourself a bullet, though, if you want. I don't think I can live another day out here." Max's eyebrows shot up in true astonishment. The paramedic was abnormally calm about his predicament.

Johnny was anything but calm but he wasn't going to give the two convicts the satisfaction of knowing that. Where there was life there was hope and even in his current condition the thought of another few hours, a half-day, a day, meant the possibility of rescue. It was worth an argument. He began a painful shuffle northward through the foliage.

\* \* \* \* \*

First light found Roy, Chet, Jake and a search crew hand-picked from the elite of Law Enforcement, Search and Rescue and K-9 Search gathered near the entrance to the ravine that had been Chris and Jennifer's salvation. Chris had wanted to come with them instead of going to Rampart to be checked over. He wanted to show them personally the spot where they had made their escape and to be in on the rescue of his beloved 'Uncle'. The response, of course, was instantaneous and hadn't required even a split-second of thought. JoAnne had been so forceful in her resounding "NO!" that she had even startled Roy in her vehemence. He had other reasons aside from his almost overwhelming need to keep his son safe, however. As much as the idea horrified him, Roy had no idea what they were going to find. If they did indeed discover the worst, he would not add to his son's trauma by exposing him to Johnny's dead body. He was having a hard enough time dealing with that concept himself. He had promised his anguished son that he would find Johnny and bring him home. He couldn't promise

Christopher that Johnny would come home alive.

The leader of this search team, a crusty old Marine who simply went by the moniker of 'Sarge', had fleshed out a plan that would allow them to move swiftly and enclose the escapees in a pincer movement. Even now a large party similar to theirs was starting out in a large sweep pattern from the highway. Sarge's team would pick up the trail from the prisoners last known location, which Chris had provided from the safety of the Ranger Station, and allow the search dogs to scent out the direction. What hadn't been said, although Roy and Chet had deduced it on their own, was that the dogs would be able to follow the trail easier and faster because of Johnny's injuries. Dogs always had an easier time following a blood trail.

The rays of the rising sun illuminated the area where Chris and Jenny had last seen their captors. Roy's stomach twisted. It wasn't hard, even for him, to see some of what had happened here. The dusty ground in front of the wash had been disturbed. Man sized shoe prints were interspersed with the boot prints of hiking boots and the smaller tennis shoe prints of children. There were several dark areas on the packed earth that, had one not known what they were looking for, would have been easy to miss. An experienced eye, however, could see that the ground had soaked up a dark liquid at one time. One spot was quite sizable. Roy tried not to think of the implications of all that lost blood. He turned his head away from the sight of two German Shepherd dogs sniffing excitedly around the only physical traces of his friend. A flash of color caught his eye and he took a few steps toward an object on the ground. His stomach lurched again when he found his son's tennis shoe. All the possible might-have-beens flashed through his mind as he stared down at that forlorn shoe lying discarded in the dust. He dropped to his knees and vomited.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a beautiful day. Much too beautiful a day to die, Johnny mused. The sun was warm on his face, the breeze redolent of pine and wildflowers. Birds sang in the treetops and all about him nature pulled the mantle of deep summer about her with sensuous grace. Such a day was meant for picnics and bird watching; hide and seek or a lover's tryst in a secluded glade. This would have been the last day of camping and hiking for he and Roy's children. It would have been a perfect ending to a wonderful weekend. Now it was destined for another kind of ending.

Johnny wondered how Christopher and Jenny were doing. If all had gone as planned, and Johnny wouldn't think of any other possibility than that of success, they should be safe in Roy and JoAnne's arms. It bothered him tremendously that he would probably not be able to see them safe again with his own eyes. He had promised and had taken his best shot. He hoped it had been good enough. He hoped Roy and Jo could forgive him for the trauma their children had gone through.

Johnny shuffled to a stop and tried to get his bearings. Max stepped up to his side and peered at him with concern.

"You're not lost, I hope, Mr. Gage? That would be a great misfortune." Johnny just shook his head. His voice was almost gone and he had no desire to use what little bit of it he had left talking to this jerk. Ollie, standing behind the hostage, gave a little jerk and slap of the rope tether leading from Johnny's chest.

"Giddy up, horsey." Ollie thought he was very clever. Johnny thought Ollie was a moron. He shuffled painfully ahead and stopped again as another coughing spell seized him around the chest. The sharp pain from his chest and ribs would have dropped him had he not been so unwilling to bend his knees. He bent at the waist and hacked until he was gasping and dizzy, shocked to see blood-streaked sputum flecking the grass.

//Full blown Pneumonia// He knew that it was a possibility but now his own diagnosis was confirmed.

//Damn//

The three men continued their northward journey. Johnny's vision began to waver and his attention wander. He was finding it more and more difficult to keep his mind on the task at hand. Fever and exhaustion were taking their toll. Several times a jerk on his tether was required to bring him back to reality.

Toward late afternoon, as the sun was beginning its slow, arcing rendezvous with the sea, Max was startled out of the boring repetition of putting one foot in front of the other by the 'whup-whup-whup' of helicopter blades above his head. He quickly motioned for Ollie to seek cover with their unwilling guide and dove for a large bush. Ollie simply swept Johnny off his feet and slammed him onto the ground under the sheltering limbs of a large oak. Johnny immediately began a new bout of jagged coughing. Max thought carefully on the significance of the unexpected chopper. As he did so he heard the helicopter make a wide turn and come back over just east of their position. This wasn't an area predisposed to helicopter flight. Logically, his survivalist mind told him, they would only be out searching for something or someone in unlandable terrain such as this. Therefore, the brats must have won through to civilization and alerted the authorities. The thought was galling. He wormed his way over to Ollie and their hacking, red-faced tour guide.

"It seems, Ollie, that your sweet little girlfriend and her brother have set the dogs upon us." Max glared at the now gasping paramedic before returning his attention back to the ugly, smash-nosed convict. "I would assume that there are ground teams even now making their way toward us from several directions."

Ollie's face turned from studious concentration to stark fear as he deciphered the meaning behind the little mans words. "There comin' to git us?? I ain't goin' back ta prison, Max! You gotta do something! You'll figure out somethin'. You're real good a figurin' out things. This is all the stupid injun's fault! Gimme your gun and let me kill 'im now and then you and me can git away, O.K. Max?" One beefy hand reached for the gun tucked into Max's waistband.

"No, Ollie. We can't kill him now. I think the Feds are getting close. We may be able to use our friend here as a bargaining chip. Tie his leash up and let's get ready." Max ordered, then set about chewing on his lower lip, lost in thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Johnny sat with his back against a tree, legs flung wide and hands unfeeling in their tight bonds. Wheezing painfully, he attempting to drop his head forward to cough but was brought up short by the

rope securing him to the tree. He opted to tip his head as far back as possible and tried to draw breath into reluctant lungs. Casting about him with one slitted eye, Johnny was vaguely disconcerted at the dreamlike quality of his surroundings.

//I don't remember the trees and sky ever looking so funny. Well, maybe that one time after sneaking into the sweat lodge and breathing in the smoke from the ceremonial fire. It was so hot in there, just like now. Hey, that's where I am! Here's 'ol Sammy Crow preachin' on the spirits to me.//

Johnny's fevered eye looked up into the face of Max standing over him with the gun. He was shouting. Johnny could not make out his words but they seemed angry and defensive. The noise hurt his ears. He tried to scan his surroundings and was surprised to see a group of people several yards away. The scene shifted slightly and Johnny found himself backstage at a Styx rock concert.

//I love these assignments. Roy doesn't like the noise or the crowds but man do we meet some interesting people. The crowd's really into it tonight. I wish that big roadie would sit down though. He's blocking the view for the crowd.//

He watched in annoyance as a large, ugly roadie stood at the front of the stage while the crowd stood just beyond, booing and calling for him to move so they could get a better look at the lead singer who, oddly enough, seemed to be standing right next to Johnny with the microphone pointed at his head. The paramedic wondered fleetingly why he was out on stage but was more annoyed at the way the stage lights hurt his eyes. The heat was oppressive.

//I think maybe Roy's right. These assignments aren't all they're cracked up to be. //

Johnny closed his eye briefly and shook his head. He could hear a 'whup-whup-whup' somewhere overhead.

//Tribal drums?// Looking up he found a formal Powwow in progress, the drums beating steadily and the dancers moving in a circle about him. Father Tall-Trees stood next to him chanting toward the dancers and waving a painted stick about.

//Ah, rats. Not the bear story again. Every year it's the bear story. Whoa! This is weird. The bear is actually here!// Johnny watched in absolute fascination as a huge, lumbering bear suddenly shuffled out to stand on two legs before the dancers. He was roaring mightily. Father Tall-Trees was screaming now and Johnny was shocked to feel the painted stick jammed into the side of his head.

//Hey! Watch it there! You're the one who called the bear up, not me!// The bear turned as if to rush to Tall-Trees side when suddenly a loud thunder clap filled the air and the bear stumbled. Johnny watched as the mythical bear seemed to fold in on itself in slow motion and sink to the ground.

//I know that's not part of the story.// Further thought was cut off as Father Tall-Trees snatched him by his collar and tried to yank him up. Johnny couldn't rise, however, and his collar was strangling him. He fought for precious air as Tall-Trees shrieked and waved his stick in Johnny's face. Spots had begun to dance in front of his already wavering vision when another mighty thunderclap sent Father Tall-Trees sprawling into the astonished paramedic's lap. Bewildered, he raised his head to see the tribal dancers moving forward toward them. One dancer broke away and sped to Johnny's side. The

man seemed to be talking but Johnny couldn't make out the words. He shook his head again and took another look at the dancer whose Native American features slowly dissolved into the face of Roy DeSoto.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wait was almost unbearable. Roy and Chet strained to be able to catch the words floating up from the hostage negotiator. From their position well out of harm's way they could only make out a word or two but it was quite evident that things weren't going smoothly. As soon as the authorities had announced to the convicts that they were effectively surrounded things had gone sour. The little escapee with the thinning hair kept shouting and waving the gun around. His large companion paced like a caged beast, gesticulating wildly and bellowing obscenities at the encircled law enforcement. Johnny, slumped listlessly with his back against a tree, seemed to take little or no notice of the melodrama being enacted before him. This fact worried Roy almost as much as the ropes cruelly binding his friend to a tree infuriated him.

Chet divided his attention between the scene unfolding below and his colleague. From the moment the team had come upon the three men below and found Johnny alive but tethered like an animal Chet had worried that Roy's tenuous grip over his stoic outer shell was slipping. The last few days had been nightmarish by anyone's standards and Chet had determined to tag along as much for his concern for Roy's emotional health as for Johnny's physical well being.

Roy interrupted Chet's surreptitious spying. "I wish I could get down there. I can't see well enough from up here. It seems that Johnny's struggling for breath. What do you think?" His murmured voice was low and intense.

Chet peered intently at the bedraggled and bound man far below. "I don't know, Roy. Yea, maybe. He's been beaten. That much I can tell. His knees look really rough, too. He's covered in so much dirt, though, that it's hard to tell for sure from up here."

Roy chewed his lip in consternation. Silence fell between the two for a moment and the words of the negotiator again floated upwards to the knoll the men were perched upon. Jake, their assigned 'baby-sitter', leaned in and spoke quietly. "I've just had radio contact with Sarge. The situation is becoming shaky. They've put snipers into place. Thank God your kids are out of this, Roy."

Roy nodded mutely, his face tight with emotion. Down in the clearing the lumbering Ollie railed against the fates that had taken his "little treasure" away from him. Chet, shocked and sickened when he realized what the pedophile was shouting about, turned to see Roy's face blanch to a sickening gray. He tentatively put a hand out to steady his friend but Roy brushed his hand away and stood, color sweeping back into his cheeks and a murderous rage filling his eyes. Chet had never seen the mild and gentle man so incensed. Roy took a step forward, as if to go to the deviant monster standing below and confront him with only the weapon of a fathers wrath. Chet would never know if his companion would have acted on the impulse.

A single sniper's bullet felled the ox-like Ollie in his tracks. Chet and Roy froze in stunned disbelief for only a moment before the stocky fireman pulled the standing man down to safety again. He was amazed to see grim satisfaction on Roy's haggard face. They now turned to watch the effect of the

assassination on the remaining convict.

They were not pleased with the result. The smaller prisoner was almost beside himself with fear now. His voice, while unintelligible from this distance, was raised to an almost hysterical pitch. He waved the gun around again. Placating gestures were put forth by the negotiator but they seemed to be falling on deaf ears.

Roy felt so helpless. He gritted his teeth in frustration. "Chet, Johnny didn't even notice when they shot that guy. He's really out of it. He's just sitting there like he doesn't care anymore. I don't like this at all. They've done something to him, Chet, and I can't do a damn thing to help. I promised Chris I'd bring him home and if something happens - - - ." He couldn't finish. His only son, his little boy, now no longer so little. Traumatized and forced to make adult decisions of life and death. If Johnny died Roy didn't think his son would ever truly heal. Roy knew exactly how he felt.

When the little convict shoved his gun into Johnny's temple Roy was up and running down the hill. He was not conscious of any decision to act. The action was instinctual and surprised even Roy. Before he reached the bottom of the knoll another rifle shot cracked the air open and the balding convict slumped across Johnny's lap.

He was across the clearing almost before the lawmen were on their feet. He knew he would hear about this later. His rashness, his foolishness. Roy didn't care. If the little man was not yet dead he would be soon enough. Roy would make sure of it. It wasn't a paramedic and lifesaver that stood over his partner, nor even a rational man, it was an emotionally exhausted father and a friend.

"Johnny? Johnny, it's Roy. Can you look at me?" Roy frantically tugged on the knots of the rope tied around the tree. He could see how tightly the rope constricted this friend's chest and the difficulty Johnny had breathing but the dark-haired man didn't lift his head, didn't seem to even hear Roy. Chet arrived amidst a flurry of pounding feet and shouted instructions from many voices. Roy spared one glance for the mustachioed man. "Chet! I can't get this untied!" His fingers scrabbled at the knot. Chet dug hastily in his pocket.

"Roy! Skip the knot. I've got a pocketknife. We'll cut it off." Squatting quickly he slipped the sharp edge between the tree and the rough hemp. Roy knelt down and took his first good look into his partner's face. It was ghastly; bruised and coated with dried blood, dirt and sweat. His lips were split and mangled. His eye swollen and discolored, the edges of the gash below the eyebrow puffy and red. Johnny's good eye looked out through eyelids at half-mast, distant and unfocused. The dead body of Max was shifted carefully off of Johnny's lap by officers after a few quick photos and crime scene experts began to detail the area. An order was issued to radio the go-ahead to medical help waiting on the nearest road. As a cleared and certified Paramedic, Roy was left to deal with the hostage.

The rope parted and fell away. Johnny listed slightly to the left and Roy steadied him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Johnny? It's me, partner. It's Roy. Can you look at me?" Roy tried to keep any anxiousness out of his voice, tried to be calm and soothing. He placed a hand against Johnny's forehead, felt the heat radiating and saw the fever glaze in his one good eye. The rescued man slowly rose his head and turned to the sound of the kind voice. Roy saw him struggle to bring the world back into focus, saw

his eyes shift and begin to clear. Johnny gazed with bewilderment at the person before him and rasped in a voice raw with sickness, abuse and dehydration.

"Roy?" His eye tracked slightly to the right, as if taking in a scene only he could see. "Roy? Why are you . . . dancing at a Powwow?"

Chet couldn't help the almost hysterical snort that erupted. Before he could remark on the unusual question Johnny burst forth with a series of deep, painful and bubbly coughs. He slid over onto his side this time and Roy gently eased him down. The paramedic in Roy was dismayed to see bloody sputum flecking his partner's lips as the wracking cough went on and on. Finally Johnny lay, gasping and spent, trying to suck in enough air to keep his congested lungs working. His eyes were clearer, however, when he looked up into the concerned gaze of his friends. He tried a lopsided grin but it only served to crack his lips open again.

"Shit. That hurt." Johnny looked around and took in the chaotic tableau. Law enforcement personnel contained the scene, radios crackled with distant commands and a helicopter hovered overhead. He let it all sink in as he labored for breath. With Johnny now on his side Chet could clearly see the bound wrists and moved to free them. He tried to slip the pocketknife between the rope and the skin but Johnny's wrists were so swollen that it was impossible to wedge the knife between the skin and the hemp without cutting his friend in the process. For some reason this tiny act of help that he was unable to perform bothered Chet more than anything else up to this point. He threw the knife down and stood abruptly.

"I can't get him loose, Roy! The ropes are too tight and his hands are really swollen and I can't get him LOOSE!" Chet choked out the words and turned away, his shoulders hitching in an effort to contain a sob. Roy felt for him but couldn't leave his partner to offer any solace. Now that he had something to do he was feeling more in control and calmer.

"Chet? Chet! You need to go meet the medical personnel and show them where we are. Get a pair of bandage scissors from them. They have blunt ends and won't hurt Johnny when we cut the ropes off." Roy's voice was sure and professional now. Chet soaked it in and shook himself. He had been given a task. He nodded purposefully.

"Got it." Chet declared and jogged off.

Johnny swiveled his head slowly back to look at his partner's face. Roy was busy unscrewing the cap of a canteen full of water.

"Roy." Johnny's anguished whisper stopped Roy in mid-action and he looked into a face full of remorse and fear. "Roy, the children. Please. . . tell me you're here . . . because you found Chris . . . and Jenny?" The gasps of breath came quicker now and Roy was astonished to see tears welling in Johnny's eyes, even around the swollen lids of the injured one. "They have to be . . . all right, Roy. If they aren't . . ."

"Johnny. They're fine. You kept them safe, Johnny. You kept them safe."

\* \* \* \* \*

Chet stumbled over a tree root and righted himself. He could hear the medical team, a little distance behind him, panting and swearing softly as they lugged their heavy equipment through the dense trees. The clearing came into view and the stocky firefighter put on a burst of speed. He ignored the controlled chaos of flashbulbs popping and people shouting back and forth. He had seen crime scene investigations before and was careful to skirt around the major area to avoid any contamination.

Chet slid to a stop beside Roy, panting and triumphantly brandishing a pair of bandage scissors. Johnny was now propped up on several backpacks in an attempt to ease his breathing. In Chet's previous haste to free his friend he hadn't really gotten a good look at his friend. The dark haired paramedic hardly looked human. Covered with dirt, sweat and blood, his clothing torn and crusted, Johnny looked like something from one of Chet's B-movies. His hair stuck out in stiff spikes, glued together by old, dried blood. Panting in short, gasping breaths Johnny looked wearily up at his friend and attempted a grin.

"Ches . . . Chester B. . . stop staring . . . and get . . . me loose."

Chet flushed in embarrassment and dropped to his knees beside his friend. "Sorry, Gage, but you look like something the cat dragged in."

He heard a snort from the prone man as he gently turned him to the side. Roy steadied his partner as Chet very carefully slid the tips of the bandage scissors between the first loop of rope and the swollen skin of Johnny's wrist. The scissors were not meant for cutting through such a thick barrier and it took several minutes of sawing before the tough hemp finally parted. Chet quickly unwound the remaining loops and very slowly brought the injured man's arms around to the front for the first time in almost 36 hours. Johnny moaned as his cramped muscles protested.

The two man SAR team approached the threesome and nodded a hello to Roy. He recognized them from a couple of previous search and rescues that had included the two paramedics. He never thought to be working with them on his own partner. They knelt, setting the portable stokes aside for the moment and began opening their equipment cases.

"We were told there was a certified paramedic on site, Roy. Didn't know it was you. We brought equipment for you." Lonnie, the senior member of the team grinned in satisfaction. While certified in emergency first aid, the pair was not paramedic trained and couldn't administer drugs. It was an issue they had discussed with Roy and Johnny. It was ironic that their argument to the Search and Rescue department would get a strong boost from a paramedic's misfortune. Don, the younger member of the team, turned to Johnny.

"Geez, Gage. We asked for help convincing Headquarters to send us to paramedic training but you didn't have to put yourself this far out!" His joking demeanor masked a worried scan of the patient's condition. Johnny was rubbing his puffy, discolored hands together, obviously agitated and in pain from the returning circulation. His lips were pressed tightly together and the cords in his neck stood out as he gritted his teeth. Roy was busy setting up the biophone. He cast quick looks at his partner. He knew Johnny was trying to tough it out but the effort to stay awake and coherent was costing him. His energy was flagging fast. Another round of coughing overtook the ailing man as Roy finished his connection with Rampart. He watched as Chet helped Johnny to sit up. His partner was attempting to wrap weakened arms around his chest to support his painful coughing but he just didn't have the

strength. Lonnie quickly slid an oxygen mask down over Johnny's face and Don adjusted the flow to 100 percent.

Roy brought the phone to his lips. "Rampart, this is Squad . . ." He paused momentarily. Squad 51 was being manned by Brice and Bellingham. He continued. "This is Firefighter/Paramedic Roy DeSoto, how do you read?" The response was immediate. Roy knew that their friends at the hospital would be waiting for word on Johnny. They would have had a chance to talk to JoAnne the previous night after the children had been taken in.

"This is Rampart, Roy. Go ahead." Dr. Brackett's voice came through tinny but strong.

"Rampart, I have a male, age 28, suffering from multiple injuries. Patient has severe lacerations to both knees with swelling and discharge. Laceration above the right eye, also with swelling and discharge. Patient appears to have lost a quantity of blood through the nose. Contusions over the face and chest and tenderness to the ribcage indicate that the patient has . . . has been severely beaten, Rampart." Roy paused, swallowing hard. Don was in the process of scribbling notes on a pad of paper while Lonnie took Johnny's vitals. They nodded their encouragement and Roy continued.

"Patient is experiencing difficulty in breathing and is expectorating bloody sputum. He also has some swelling and bruising around the neck. He is feverish and semi-coherent. Stand by for vitals, Rampart." Roy took the proffered slip of paper from Don. "Rampart, vitals are as follows: B.P. 90 over 40, pulse is 110, respirations are 40 and shallow. Temperature is 102, Rampart."

The firm voice of Dr. Brackett came back. "Roy, start an I.V. with Ringers wide open and one of Saline TKO. Have you got him on O2?"

"That's affirmative, Rampart." Roy quickly documented the directions.

"Get him into a C-collar, Roy, and transport ASAP. What do you estimate is your E.T.A.?" Roy could hear the concern in Dr. Brackett's voice and pictured Dixie standing by his side. Roy glanced up at Don.

"It took us about 20 minutes to walk here from the chopper and it's about 10 minutes by air to Rampart." Don mused. Roy relayed the information to Rampart.

Dr. Brackett's voice came back to him. "Affirmative, Roy. Just bring him home, O.K.?"

Roy's throat tightened. "You can count on it, Rampart." He disconnected the line to Rampart and moved to where Johnny reclined, gasping in quick, short breaths. He knew that his partner's lungs were filling. Johnny's eyes were at half-mast, now, and wandered from time to time as if trying to find something only he could see. Roy grabbed several alcohol wipes and scrubbed a spot clean on the top of Johnny's right wrist. It took two wipes to swab away all the dirt and leave the site disinfected. Quickly and expertly he started the IV for the Ringers and then moved to the other side of his patient and repeated the process for the Saline. Adjusting the flows to their proper levels he nodded his satisfaction and watched Lonnie place a collar around Johnny's neck. Chet placed the stokes on the ground next to the injured paramedic and worked his way around the I.V. lines and O2 tubing to slip his arms under Johnny's. Don took the feet while Roy gently guided his friend's middle section and, as

a team then carefully lifted him into the stokes. Chet cradled Johnny's head for a second, then gently withdrew his hand. Trying valiantly to smile, Johnny looked up into Chet's face.

"Chet?"

The stocky firefighter gazed down at his friend. "Yea?"

"I need a bath."

Chet couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing. "Well, buddy, I'm not gonna argue with you over that one." He shook his head in amusement. Piling the O2 canister and the I.V. equipment onto the stokes each of the four men hoisted a corner and turned to survey the carnage of the crime scene one last time. They were ready to go.

\* \* \* \* \*

Johnny didn't remember much of the trip to Rampart. Things took on a surrealistic quality. Hushed and panting voices above him. The rhythmic swaying of the stokes. The flashing of green treetops turned to the flashing of helicopter blades in the sunlight. Words that seemed muffled and far away. He struggled for breath and felt the edges of his vision blur away. Sometime during the flight the altitude change caused his nose to start bleeding again. For one panic filled moment, as the blood streamed from his nose and began to fill the oxygen mask fitted snugly over his nose and mouth, Johnny thought he would drown in his own blood. He could feel it filling his mouth and a choking cough splattered the red liquid across the inside of the mask. Then Roy was there. The mask was gone and he was gently but quickly turned on his side, coughing up phlegm and blood. His blood pressure dropped again and he slipped into a twilight haze.

\* \* \* \* \*

The light hurt his eyes. Voices were around him again. This time he thought he recognized them. He could hear Dr. Brackett issuing orders in his usual no nonsense tone.

"Get me neck, knee, cross table c-spine films, and a chest x-ray. Dix, draw labs, CBC, and a full set of electrolytes. Have a unit of blood sent up and hang another bag of Ringers. He's pretty dehydrated. What's his temp?"

Johnny couldn't hear Dixie's answer. Sounds were wavery and distorted again. He thought he heard Roy's voice and tried to call out but ended up hacking in hard, wet, painful coughs. The oxygen mask appeared over his face again and sweet, pure air streamed into his aching lungs. He lay back, exhausted and panting. Johnny watched Dixie escorting Roy away and closed his eyes again. He was so tired.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was so tired. Roy couldn't remember when he had been so exhausted. The last few days had been a nightmare beyond anything he had ever imagined. Sitting now in the nurse's lounge it was all he could do to place his thoughts in a rational order. Chet was busy staring at the lounge refrigerator as if were

something new and completely alien. Roy knew his friend was zoned out into his own weary world. The blonde paramedic let him be. The door swung open and Roy looked up into the concerned eyes of his wife and children.

"Jo. The kids shouldn't be here." he admonished her softly even as he gathered his children gratefully into his arms. They smelled so good; felt so good to hold. They were real and alive and in his arms. It was the greatest feeling in the world and Roy was suddenly glad that they had come. Some of his fatigue slipped away and was replaced with an almost overwhelming and fierce feeling of love. Anything was worth this feeling.

JoAnne sank onto the couch between her husband and Chet. After giving Chet a warm smile and a squeeze on the arm she turned to her husband.

"I couldn't keep them away, Sweetheart, and I couldn't bear to be parted from them even for a few minutes. They insisted on coming. They understand better than we what Johnny has been through. I . . . I wasn't sure it was a wise thing to do but the crisis counselor said they needed to see this through. To have closure . . . one way or the other. They don't need to see Johnny right now. But they need to be here."

Christopher looked up into his father's eyes. " I won't leave Uncle Johnny again, Dad. I have to be here. He has to know that I'm here. I . . ." The young man's eyes filled with tears and Roy hugged him close. If he had ever thought his son irresponsible in the past he would never think that again. Chris had taken a crash course in responsibility. Jennifer watched her father and brother solemnly. All the adults tried to talk around her, thinking that she was too young to hear or understand everything that was going on. In the manner of most young children, she understood more than they thought she did. She had seen the change in Chris these last few days. She understood them but kept silent. It was easier that way.

"Roy." JoAnne questioned her husband gently. "Have you heard anything yet?" The words had barely left her mouth when the door swung open and Dr. Brackett stepped in. Chet was immediately on his feet, moving toward the doctor with an anxious expression on his face.

"Doc?"

Dr. Brackett gave them a weary smile. "I think he'll be fine Chet, Roy, given a little time and care. We stopped the bleeding from his nose. He had a ruptured blood vessel which we cauterized with silver nitrite. He's getting a transfusion now to replace some of what he's lost."

Roy sighed with relief. The incident in the helicopter had scared him. So much blood coming from Johnny's nose in a seemingly never-ending stream. Then Johnny had faded out after his blood pressure had dropped. Even with Roy's training it was hard to see his friend's blood covered, pale face. Dr. Brackett continued.

"His knees are a mess, no doubt about it, but we got lucky. There is no infection in the joint. That's good. He would have been looking at a long recovery and permanent damage. As it is the lacerations are pretty infected and we'll have to wait to suture them until we've cleared the infection up. His ribs have been wrapped and we were able to suture the cut above his eye. I was a little concerned about the

swelling around his throat so as a precautionary measure we gave him a shot of hydrocortisone." Dr. Brackett paused in his recitation at this point. Roy took this opportunity to jump in.

"And the pneumonia?"

With a habitual twitch to his lips the doctor grimaced. "Yes, well. That's the crux of the problem. He's got a nasty case of it in both lungs."

JoAnne shook her head in bewilderment. "How is that possible? He was fine a couple of days ago! How could he get sick so quickly?" The dark-haired doctor smiled grimly at her.

"The microorganisms that cause pneumonia are always present in the upper respiratory tract. They're harmless unless resistance is severely lowered by some other factor. In this case it was a combination of blood loss, exposure, exhaustion, dehydration and the bodies immune system already fighting other infections. It can set in fairly quick in those conditions. We've got him on a broad range of antibiotics for the infection and the pneumonia but he's pretty weak. It's going to take a little time but he's got youth on his side. Barring any complications he should bounce back."

Chris disengaged himself from his father's arms and limped over to Doctor Brackett. His bruised foot was only slightly swollen but tender, nonetheless. He looked up into the tall doctor's eyes.

"I need to see Uncle Johnny, sir. When can I see him?"

Kelly Brackett considered the solemn young man before him. His first instinct was to placate the child with vague 'hospital speak' but something in Christopher's eyes made him speak honestly.

"Well, Chris, Dr. Morton is still cleaning out the debris from his knees, which is pretty painful. We had to give him something to help him get through that so he's pretty out of it at the moment. He probably wouldn't know you are there right now. After that we're going to move him upstairs to a room and the floor nurses need to clean him up a bit. He's pretty dirty. I'd say it's going to be two or three hours yet. When you do see him he may not be able to speak to you. He's got to keep an oxygen mask over his face to help him breathe. We haven't had to intubate him but it's still hard for him to catch his breath so you need to go easy on him for a while, O.K.?" Chris nodded and Dr. Brackett went on, this time catching everyone's eye in turn, including Jennifer's. "I want you all to be prepared. Johnny's not a very pretty sight right now so don't be alarmed. But it's mainly cuts and bruises that will go away with time. He's just going to be a little . . . colorful." He watched in satisfaction as both children nodded in understanding and nodding in return he took his leave of Chet and the DeSoto family.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dixie McCall sighed as she gently toweled the dark hair on the pillow below her.

"John Gage, how do you manage to get yourself into these situations" she murmured softly. She had seen the dark bruises covering his battered body, the ravaged knees and face. But the string of purple, finger-shaped marks around her friend's throat bothered her more than his other injuries. They were such a blatant reminder of the viciousness of man. The head nurse carefully patted the wet hair around

an abrasion near Johnny's hairline and continued her ministrations. When the door creaked open she turned her head to see Roy DeSoto looking in.

"Hey, is he up to company?" The blonde paramedic whispered and received a nod from Dixie. He quietly pushed the door open a little farther and slipped in, followed just as quietly by JoAnne, Chris and Jennifer. They all stood solemnly about for a moment or two, watching the slow rise and fall of Johnny's chest. Roy finally broke the silence.

"Isn't it usually the job of the floor nurses to clean up a patient? How's Johnny rate the head ER nurse?" he teased.

Dixie smiled down at the sleeping form as she finished the last bit of toweling and gathered her sponge, basin and wet towel together.

"Usually it is, yes. I just finished my shift a bit ago and came to see how John was doing. The nurses were just finishing up his bath and I offered to wash his hair. Just wanted to make sure it was done right, you know?" She smiled again as she retrieved a new pillowcase and, while Roy held his partner's head up slightly, quickly and expertly removed the old one and slipped on the new one. Once Johnny was settled back on his pillow again Dixie gave a final check of the wire support frame that held the sheet up off of the patient's loosely wrapped knees. Pulling the blanket up from the bottom of the bed she gently covered the sleeping man. She noticed that the DeSoto children were watching her with great interest.

"He's going to be all right, kids. He's sleeping very heavily right now because we gave him some pain medicine down in the ER. We had to clean his knees. He wasn't very happy about that. He was very tired to begin with, too, so he should sleep for a long time. That's really the best thing for him now. The mask is on his face to help give him more oxygen. His lungs are very congested." Dixie noticed Chris DeSoto's eyes fixed on the ring of bruises around Johnny's neck and was glad that the sheet and blanket hid most of the other tell tale signs of abuse. The blackest bruises hid beneath the tightly wrapped tape around Johnny's ribs.

Chris moved forward slowly and rested his hand on Johnny's arm, being very careful not to disturb the IV's. He studied each cut and abrasion on his friend's face and raised mournful eyes to his parents.

"He knew they were going to do this, you know. He didn't care." The young man pointed to the strangulation marks. "It looks like Ollie tried to kill him. He knew they were going to in the end, anyway."

JoAnne caught her breath at the matter-of-fact tone in his voice and stepped forward, catching her son in her arms. "It's over, sweetheart. They're gone and they can't hurt you or your sister or Johnny ever again. I think we should go home and let Uncle Johnny sleep now, OK?" She was rewarded with a tiny nod and turned her son toward the door. They hadn't taken but one step when a young student nurse stuck her head into the room.

"Are you the DeSoto's?" The red headed girl looked at the foursome expectantly. When Roy acknowledged their identity with a nod of his head she went on. "There is a bunch of reporters waiting downstairs who want to talk to the 'young hero who saved his sister'. I think they're talking about

you." She looked straight at Chris. He blanched and turned a frantic gaze to his father.

"Dad! I'm not a hero! I don't want to talk to those people. I'm not a hero! Please don't make me talk Please! I just want to go home now, Dad!" Chris had begun to tremble, his eyes wide with fright and something else.

"Christopher, you don't have to talk to anyone. It's O.K. We'll slip out the back. It's O.K." Roy gathered his son into his arms and soothed his fears.

Dixie spoke up. "They've probably got the parking garage staked out, too. Take my car. It's in the employee parking lot. I'll come by later and exchange it." She dug around in her pocket and pulled out a set of keys. "Here. It's the blue Camero, you remember? I'll get your car and meet you back at your place in about an hour." Roy gave her a grateful look and accepted the keys. He pulled out his own keys and handed them to the Dixie. JoAnne glanced up and down the hallway and indicated that all was fine. The foursome walked quickly away from the hospital room and headed for the freight elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*

Johnny awakened in the middle of a coughing spell. Even in the midst of the painful, bubbly hacking he realized that he felt better. He also realized that not only did he have an oxygen mask over his face but that he was no longer laying on the hard, dirty surface of the forest floor. Memory seeped back slowly as he lay back. Dream images of long ago tribal activities and images of Roy, both dancing at a Powwow and bending over him in concern. Memories of talking with Chet, of police converging on a crime scene, of blood in a helicopter and voices in an exam room. He opened his eyes again and looked up to find two concerned faces peering down at him.

"Hey, buddy, you back among the living?" Hank Stanley gave a hesitant smile and reached out to awkwardly pat his fallen paramedic on the shoulder. Chet Kelly stood beside his captain; wan, tired looking but beaming from ear to ear. Johnny took a moment to acclimate himself to his new circumstances before answering. He was ensconced in a hospital room, warm, dry and relatively comfortable. His knees produced only a dull throbbing. Helped, Johnny was sure, by some very good pain medication. He was able to see out of both eyes again and he felt blissfully clean. A fact for which he was profoundly thankful. A sweet flow of oxygen trickled like pure ambrosia down his raw throat and into his wheezing lungs. He managed a smile without too much discomfort to his battered lips and moved the oxygen mask off to the side.

"Well," Johnny rasped hoarsely, "at least. . . more alive than. . . the last time. . . I remember, anyway." He looked around slowly and, not seeing the one face he needed to see above all else, felt worry crowd into his already confused brain. "Where's Roy? I thought. . . I saw him before. He said. . . the kids got back. . . safely, didn't he? They are safe, aren't they?" He began to sit up, panting heavily and looking more alarmed as his thoughts began to race.

"Whoa there, Gage." Chet made a calming motion with his hands. "The kids are fine. Roy is fine. Just settle back and relax, O.K.? He's at home with them right now trying to fend off the media. Seems one of the Park Rangers that was working at Devour Campground the night Chris and Jennifer came in listened to their whole story and then made himself a buck or two by selling it to the media. All of LA

is crazy for 'The Boy Who Saved His Sister From Escaped Convicts'." Chet shook his head in disgust. "They've got Roy's place staked out and mob them whenever they try to leave."

Johnny relaxed. "Thank God. I'd rather. . . have them trying to. . . report on that than. . . about three more murders. . . by those same convicts." He croaked, the adrenaline draining from his weary body. Chet just smiled.

"I wouldn't be too happy, Gage." The stocky fireman moved slightly to give Johnny a clear view of his hospital room's doorway. A hospital Security Guard stood there, arms crossed and stern faced. Johnny's eyebrows rose and he turned a questioning look upon his friends.

"You didn't think the Park Ranger would leave you out of the story, now did you?" Captain Stanley chuckled. "Security has already caught reporters twice trying to make it to your room for an exclusive interview. One gal, that Judy Lokk that reports for Channel 5, was found sneaking around in a nurses uniform. Can you believe it? She said she wanted to get a first hand account for a feature she wanted to do called 'Kidnapped by Killers!' What a piece of work." The tall Captain shook his head in disgust.

Johnny grimaced and rolled his eyes. "I don't want. . . anything to do with. . . no God Damned. . . reporters, Cap. Tell them to. . . leave me alone." He began to yawn hugely but only succeeded in bringing on another coughing fit. His friends waited while he rode it out, glancing nervously at each other. When Johnny had regained his composure he continued wearily. "I wouldn't. . . mind it, though, if. . . you would fill me. . . in on the details. I'm kinda lost here. Who, exactly. . . were those guys? Did Chris have . . . any trouble . . . finding the Campground? Did anyone. . . know we were missing?" He looked expectantly up at the two men.

After Hank and Chet had recounted the events of the last few days they waited for Johnny to assimilate all that they had told him. Finally, Johnny turned his face away and spoke quietly.

"I just want. . . to get better and. . . put this behind me. How long. . . are they going to. . . keep me here?" The dark-haired man's eyes were beginning to droop and his companions knew he wouldn't be able to stay awake much longer.

"Well," Chet spoke up hesitantly, "Dr. Bracket said that, barring any complications that you'd be able to leave by the end of the week but you can't stay by yourself. With your knees all beat to hell you won't be able to get around very well and the pneumonia is going to leave you as weak as a kitten. Roy already said you were going to go to his place and he didn't want to hear any arguments about it."

"I'm not. . . a baby, Chet." Johnny began in a hoarse whisper. What little voice he had left was seeping away as quickly as his energy.

Chet interrupted him. "Roy said you'd argue and said to tell you not to bother. Besides, I guess Chris and Jennifer were the first to bring it up." He shuffled his feet nervously and stared at the floor. "Uh, Roy said they need to do this, Johnny. For themselves as much as for you." He looked up into the startled, anguished expression of his bedridden friend. Johnny's eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Ok." He whispered quietly and once again turned his face away.

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Johnny moved carefully with a slow, shuffling, stiff-legged step up the walk to Roy's door. It had been five days since his conversation with Captain Stanley and Chet. Although Johnny had had several visitors, including Lonnie, Don and a revolving door of firefighter's, he had missed his partner's company. In that time Roy had been able to sneak out of the house and past the media only twice to see him. He had reiterated his desire, however, to have Johnny recuperate in the DeSoto home. The media had been stymied at every turn in their efforts to interview either Johnny or the DeSoto children and had eventually relaxed their vigilance to the point where a quietly discharged Johnny could sneak down the freight elevator and away in a waiting vehicle chauffeured by Chet and Marco. The ride from the hospital was more exhausting than the slender paramedic had expected and now all he wanted to do was to lie down and sleep. The door opened quickly at the first knock and Roy stood there, craning his neck around his visitors to sweep his gaze up and down the abandoned street. Breathing a sigh of relief he ushered in his house guest.

"Sorry, Johnny. I'm so used to the media camping out on my lawn I've become paranoid." A gentle grin accompanied this statement as well a self-deprecatory shrug of his shoulders. JoAnne came into the entry way and gathered Johnny to her for a gentle hug.

"I'm so glad you're here Johnny. I know you must be tired so let's get you to bed, O.K.?" The petite woman led the way through the living room and down a hallway of the single level home. "I've put you in Chris's room. He insisted. He's going to sleep on a cot in Jen's room, although more often than not they've been ending up in the same bed lately." her voice trailed off uncertainly. Looking up into Johnny's eyes she was surprised to see understanding there.

"Nightmares." He nodded gently. "I know."

JoAnne squeezed his arm, unable to speak. She silently led him to the freshly-made bed in her son's room and set about unpacking for her visitor. Johnny awkwardly lowered himself onto the bed, trying hard not to bend his scabbed over knees anymore than he absolutely had to. The last of the lacerations had finally cleared up enough to be stitched only three days ago. Chet had come with a bag full of dressings and medications, both for Johnny's knees and his lungs.

When Johnny had arranged himself comfortably with two pillows placed behind his back by a solicitous Roy he asked the question that was uppermost on his mind.

"Where's the kids?"

JoAnne smiled as she put several pairs of cutoff sweat pants in a drawer for Johnny. "They're out back. I told them I'd come and get them as soon as you were settled. This is the first day I've actually gotten them out into the back yard. Between a new fear of strangers and fear of reporters climbing the fence they've been cooped up for days." She finished sadly. Roy chimed in.

"It'll take time, Jo. The councilor warned us of that. But they will get over it. They will." Roy's face took on a fierce, protective mien and he turned away for a moment. Gathering himself he turned back to Johnny. "Are you ready for them, Junior, or would you rather get some sleep first?"

Johnny was exhausted. His body ached in a dozen different spots. He knew, however, that sleep would not come until he saw his missing charges. He needed to see the DeSoto children for himself. Words were fine but only until he set eyes on them would he truly believe that they were home and safe. "I want to see them."

Marco and Chet went off to find the children.

It was a bittersweet reunion that followed. Chris and Jennifer bounded into the room, anxious to see Johnny. No one could mistake the solemn look on Chris's face when he lovingly greeted his 'Uncle'. Jennifer, however, had gleefully come fully prepared with her 'Little Miss Junior Nurses Kit' and promptly set up shop. With great solicitude she carefully examined and exclaimed over every 'owie' and, to Johnny's great delight and her brother's great chagrin, proceeded to take the patients temperature with a large, plastic, toy thermometer. The atmosphere relaxed even further when the little girl recalled Dr. Brackett's statement about Johnny's condition becoming "colorful", which was all Chet needed to step up to the challenge of baiting his fallen comrade. After Jennifer pointed out that a large, greenish yellow bruise on Johnny's upper leg looked "just like Big Bird" even Chris succumbed to the laughter that was a welcome change after such a long period of worry and fear. But when Johnny began to show signs of sleepiness it was Chris who decided that it was time for him to rest and quickly ushered the still smiling crowd out of the room. It was immediately evident to all concerned that the young man had appointed himself Johnny's personal guardian and assistant.

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The house was quite. For the first time Roy felt that he could truly relax. Everyone was where he could keep an eye on them. Everyone was safe. JoAnne was snuggled comfortably against him on the couch as they watched Johnny Carson's monologue. The kids were finally asleep after an evening game of Monopoly with Johnny, who had drifted off toward the end of the game. Chris had insisted on being the one to bring the bedridden paramedic his supper after declaring that Johnny's knees would never get better if he got in and out of bed too often. The bathroom across the hall was far enough, the young man had decided. At least for the next day or two. Johnny was wise enough to not only realize the truth of the statement but to also sense that his young friend needed something that could only be gained by caring for the injured man. After a particularly savage bout of coughing it was Chris who stood by the side of the bed with water and pills that his mother had given him to take to Johnny.

JoAnne raised her head off of Roy's shoulder and turned her face up to him.

"Roy, are we doing the right thing, letting Chris take on some of the burden of caring for Johnny? He's only twelve." Her voice was hushed but filled with concern. Roy thought a moment before responding.

"Jo, he may be twelve in a lot of things but part of him grew up out there. He'll never be a child again in some of the ways he looks at the world. I think this is something he needs to do. I think for him it's a way of healing. Maybe of forgiving himself. He doesn't understand that there is nothing to forgive. If this makes him feel better I think we ought to let him do it. If it gets too out of hand then we need to have him talk to the councilor again."

JoAnne studied the patterns on the sofa. Her son wasn't the only one feeling guilty. She had said some harsh words about her husband's partner. She realized the words were said in the heat of the moment, a moment full of fear for her children, but they burned in her heart nonetheless. She turned her head back to study her husband's strong profile and had decided to broach the subject with him when a noise interrupted their concentration. It was a familiar sound by now. One of the children with a nightmare. JoAnne pulled herself up, followed closely by Roy, and headed toward the bedrooms. It wasn't until they reached the entrance to the hallway that they both realized the soft, anguished words that were cried out were not coming from Jennifer's room, where both children were sleeping, but from Chris's room. JoAnne moved instantly to Johnny's bed and settled on the edge. She could see Roy's silhouette outlined in the doorway. Gently laying her hand upon the thrashing man's head she spoke softly, soothingly.

"Johnny? Johnny, wake up now. You're having a nightmare." Having little experience in dealing with nightmares in adults she fell into the familiar pattern she used with her children. She stroked Johnny's forehead gently and called his name in an attempt to bring him back to reality. She was startled when this full-grown 'child' sat up abruptly and grasped her shoulders in a strong, pinching grip.

"No! Please!" The anguished words were wrenched from the young paramedic's soul. Johnny's eyes were open but they did not register her presence. She was aware that Roy had moved into the room and was now standing behind her.

"Please don't hurt them!" Johnny was looking straight into her eyes, yet he still did not register where he was or who he was talking to. His words slipped out in a heartrending sob.

"Please, oh God, please! Nononononono . . ."

JoAnne brought her hands up around his arms and took his face in them. Speaking louder and shaking him a little she tried to get through to the frightened man.

"Johnny! Johnny, it's time to wake up. This is JoAnne. Roy's here, too. The children are safe. You're safe now, Johnny, but I need you to wake up, OK?"

She watched as awareness slowly crept back into his eyes. When he ventured a timid "Jo?" she merely nodded and was astonished when the grip on her shoulders pulled her forward into a fierce embrace.

"Oh, God, Jo. I couldn't stop them. I couldn't . . . I couldn't . . ." And he was weeping. For the first time since the moment Max and Ollie had burst through the bushes into the campground, Johnny allowed himself to feel vulnerable and afraid. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry . . ."

Roy moved closer and sat on the bed beside his wife who was making shushing noises. He reached a hand out and laid it on his partner's shoulder. "It's OK, Johnny. You did everything humanly possible and because of you my kids are home safe. I owe you more than I can ever repay you. There's nothing to be sorry for."

JoAnne was sniffing by now, as well. "Johnny, it's me who has to apologize to you, do you hear? I was so mad at you when I found out what had happened. I cursed you, Johnny, and I shouldn't have. I should have known that you would find a way to keep my babies safe. I didn't have enough faith in

you and for that I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?" She looked pleadingly at the young man now trying to regain his composure.

"Forgive you, Jo? There's nothing to forgive." Johnny swiped his eyes on the arm of his tee shirt and looked down in embarrassment. He was not used to losing his composure in this way. "I wish I could have done better. Let's just say we're even, OK?" He looked back up and saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Instinctively he knew that Chris had witnessed the entire scene and was now slipping back to his cot in Jennifer's room. Something else that would have to be dealt with, and soon. "I'm all right now, Jo. Thanks for being here. Both of you."

JoAnne leaned forward and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"You're welcome, Johnny Gage. Now I think it's time we all got some sleep, hmm?" She and Roy rose and exited the room, leaving the sole remaining occupant alone with his thoughts.

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Roy wiped the sweat from his eyes and scanned the yard. The grass really didn't need cut all that badly, due to the heat and slow growth of late summer, but he could never be sure how hectic his schedule was going to be so he mowed when he got the chance. Looking up he spied Mike Stoker's car turning into the drive and gladly took the opportunity to shut down the mower. Glancing over his shoulder he could see that JoAnne, working in the flowerbed, had noticed Mike, too, and was brushing the dirt off her hands. Mike strolled over to Roy.

"Hey, how's the DeSoto household today?" Mike asked in his usual quiet way. Roy smiled in return.

"Pretty good, all things considered. Johnny's mending pretty fast, although he still sleeps a whole lot. Doc said he would, that it's normal when recuperating from pneumonia, but I think Johnny's starting to get antsy to get back to his own apartment. The kids seem to be getting back to normal. I think having Johnny here has been really good for both of them. Chris is more relaxed today than I've seen him since this whole thing started." Roy smiled again. Things were finally starting to settle back to normal. Even Johnny's nightmare last night couldn't shake his good mood. Mike nodded happily.

"So, pal, you ready to come back to work tomorrow?" Mike raised an eyebrow in question.

"Yea. I think I am. Personal leave is up. Besides, I'm leaving that partner of mine in very capable hands." Roy finished as JoAnne walked up to join them. Roy slipped an arm around his petite wife, who was grinning from ear to ear.

"Hi, Mike. Would you like a lemonade? I can tell you that we're both ready for one. I've been planting flowers just outside of Chris's window." The dark-haired woman grinned again. "And if you are both really quiet and tip toe to Chris's room you'll have your afternoon's entertainment as well." Her eyes sparkled with mischief. Roy looked questioningly at her but she just smirked and shook her head.

The threesome proceeded quietly to the house and slipped inside. When Chris looked up from the book he was reading on the couch Roy held up a silencing finger to his lips and watched in pleased amusement as his son smiled and joined the growing procession. As quietly as possible the foursome

made their way to the door of the room Johnny was now using and paused. They could hear two voices coming from the room, one little girl voice and one strange, high-pitched and slightly hoarse voice.

"Midge, that's a lovely dress your wearing today. Do you have a date?" The little girl's voice asked.

"Well, Barbie, I thought I would take Skipper to the zoo. Do you want to come?" The unmistakable voice of Johnny Gage, disguised as it was by a falsetto pitch, made the four people in the hallway clamp hands to their mouths in an effort to suppress their laughter.

"Oh, that sounds great. I have to change, though. I can't wear a ball gown to the zoo. What outfit do you think I should wear? And should we invite Ken?" Jennifer's sweet voice questioned her play partner.

"Hmmm." The falsetto came again. "I think the pink sundress would look nice. Or maybe the yellow shorts outfit? I think this dress is too fancy for the zoo. I'm going to have to change, too" The voice switched abruptly to the normal tones of the sick man. "Jen, how come I have to be Midge and Skipper all the time? You have to have at least five Barbies. Couldn't I be Barbie next time?" The plaintive tone was almost too much for the audience in the hall. They slowly leaned forward until four heads were poking around the door jamb. The sight that met their eyes was unusual. Johnny lay stretched out on his side on the bed, his back to the grinning audience. He was propped up on several pillows. He held a red-haired doll in one hand and was delicately trying to unsnap the back of the doll's dress with the fingers of his other hand. Doll clothes were spread over the bed between him and Jennifer, along with other doll paraphernalia, a pink corvette, a smaller female doll and a larger male doll. The little girl was humming happily as she quickly and expertly switched outfits on her Barbie doll. She looked up and caught sight of her audience just as Johnny began to speak in the high falsetto of his Midge doll again.

"Should I wear sandals or tennis shoes... with this... er..." Johnny became aware of Jennifer's diverted attention to something behind him. He slowly turned his head to look over his shoulder, dreading what he knew he would find. "Um, ... ah ...." It was worse than he could have imagined. The rest of the DeSoto family with the addition of Mike Stoker all ranged in the doorway grinning like idiots. He felt the blush start at his toes and flash quickly up his torso, his neck, his face and finally settle in his ears as his audience broke into hysterical snorts and guffaws of laughter.

Roy proceeded the rest into the room, laughing so hard he thought his sides would split. It felt so good to laugh like this again. He watched as Johnny first blushed then looked defensive.

"Hey!" The dark-haired man spluttered. "I was bored, OK?? And Jennifer was just trying to keep me busy and there's nothing on TV and ..." he trailed off at the sight of Mike Stoker holding his ribs from laughter. It wasn't very often anyone had the opportunity to see the normally very quiet Mike laugh like this. It was kind of nice. Even if it was at his expense. "OK, Stoker. I'm glad you're amused but if you breath one word of this to Chet. You, too, Roy! I mean it! Not ONE WORD! You know he'll make my life miserable!" He finished desperately. Mike stood gasping.

"I don't know, Johnny. This is just too good to pass up. I might need some encouragement to keep shut." The engineer grinned impishly. Johnny just glowered at his tall friend.

"How 'bout my first born child, Stoker? You tell Chet and I'll just have to transfer. That's all there is to it." Johnny snorted in disgust. He knew Mike and Roy had him by the short hairs on this. He was going to owe them big time. Or so he thought until a little voice piped in.

"You stop making fun of Uncle Johnny! If you tell Uncle Chet about me and him playin' dolls then I'm gonna be mad at you for the rest of my life! He was being nice to me!" She glared defensively back and forth between her father and her 'Uncle' Mike and they both held their hands up in surrender. They knew when to accept defeat gracefully and this time Johnny had an eight- year-old angel of mercy on his shoulder. There was no going against this force of nature.

"You win, Sweetie. We won't tell a soul. Will we Mike?" Roy looked questioningly at Stoker and was glad to see the affirmative nod, then looked at his son. "Right, Chris?" His son gave in with a disgusted roll of his eyes at the perfect opportunity missed but nodded all the same. Roy knew his wife favored Johnny too much to give him up to the other guys at the station so he didn't even have to ask her.

"So," JoAnne looked around at all the smiling faces and felt happiness flood through her, " is everyone finally ready for that lemonade?"

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The clock had just hit 11:00 p.m. when JoAnne and Roy heard the muttering and thrashing start up from Chris's room again. They looked at each other and sighed. Johnny was having another nightmare. They both slipped out of bed and padded toward their guest's room. They were surprised to see the tiny figure of their daughter ahead of them, however. She padded softly on bare feet, half-asleep and heavy lidded, clutching her stuffed Cookie Monster. Without a word she climbed into Johnny's bed and curled up against his chest. The two adults watched in astonishment as the restless man pulled her close and fell instantly silent, back into untroubled oblivion.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following morning, after Roy had departed for his first day back to work in two weeks, Johnny declared that he was well enough to move to the couch. JoAnne had been expecting this. When her husband's partner got bored it became progressively harder to keep him down. She brought him several board games.

"Chris, Johnny, I've got to take Jennifer school shopping today. School starts in ten days and we haven't started getting ready. Things have been a little ... crazy around here." She smiled to take any criticism out of the words. "I've left some sandwiches and lemonade in the fridge. Johnny, your pills are on the counter and Chris can give them to you at noon. Why don't you two play some board games or cards to keep yourself amused. Johnny, I know you think you are ready to get up and take on the world but Dr. Brackett said five days of bed rest and since this is only day three out of the hospital you have two more days to go. You're suppose to be resting and that's exactly what you are going to do, do I make myself clear?"

Johnny nodded mutely in wide-eyed acceptance. Chris just smirked. He recognized his mothers 'do-as-I-say-or-else' tone of voice and was gleeful, and relieved, to see that it worked as well on grown

men as it did for half-grown sons. JoAnne gave a final appraising glance at the two stay-at-homes and ushered Jennifer out the door. Both young men gave a sigh of relief.

After a game of Monopoly, Johnny took a short nap. Chris woke him for lunch and they had the ham and cheese sandwiches left for them. Johnny had a dessert of pills. When Chris moved to clean up their plates Johnny felt it was time to start the conversation he had been putting off. He was taken completely off guard, therefore, when Christopher beat him to it.

"Johnny, I heard your nightmare the other night." Chris stated simply.

Johnny nodded. "I know." He shifted a little on the couch and watched as his young friend came to sit cross-legged on the floor in front of him. "Did it bother you?"

"No. Yes. I mean..." Chris searched for the words he needed. "I was surprised. I've been having nightmares but I didn't expect you to. You were so brave. I didn't think ... you cried, Uncle Johnny." Troubled, blue eyes meet somber brown.

"Do you think it's shameful to cry, Chris? Or are you surprised that I was scared?"

"I think it's all right to cry. I mean, I did. But then I was really scared and ... I don't know... I didn't expect you to, that's all. I think, in a way, it made me feel better. I guess I didn't think you were scared. You didn't act like it." Chris looked back at Johnny with wonder.

"Well, Chris, I'll let you in on a little secret. I was terrified. The whole time. And I thought you were pretty brave, myself." Johnny frowned inwardly at the vigorous shaking of the young blonde's head. Chris's face and voice were full of bitterness when he replied.

"I wasn't brave at all, Uncle Johnny. I just did what you told me to do. That doesn't take bravery. What you did took real guts. The newspapers kept wanting to talk to me, saying I was a real hero. I'm not a hero! I'm NOT a hero!" The twelve-year-old jumped up and began to pace. Johnny was alarmed at how agitated the boy was. This wasn't going as well as he had planned. Something else was going on here.

"OK. Maybe you're not a hero. I don't think of myself as one either. I just did what I had to do to get you and Jennifer out and then for me to stay alive. Does that make me a hero ... or a survivor, Chris?" Johnny tried to reason.

"To me you are both. You saved us, Uncle Johnny, even though you knew what was going to happen to you. That makes you a hero. Then you survived. But you thought of us first! I know you told me to take Jen and go. I can deal with that. I was doing what had to be done. Yea, I feel guilty for leaving you behind but I can understand why you made me. That's not it! Don't you see? That's not IT!!" Chris was crying by this point and Johnny was becoming seriously alarmed. As the boy passed him on one of his paces the paramedic reached out and snagged his young friend's wrist. Chris halted in his tracks but wouldn't look at Johnny. Instead he looked steadfastly at the ground, his chest heaving with emotion.

Johnny spoke softly, as he would if talking to a spooked colt. "Tell me, Christopher. What's eating you

up inside." When the boy did not respond Johnny searched through his own feelings during his captivity. After a moment he drew Chris down onto his knees, making it possible to look the young man straight in the eye. With his other hand he tilted the boys chin up.

"Christopher DeSoto, look at me." He was rewarded when the frightened boy reluctantly raised his eyes to meet his. "Chris, are you glad that you survived?"

Tears began to run down the smooth cheeks of the twelve-year-old.

"Yes." he whispered. "Yes. And that's the worst thing of all, Uncle Johnny. I feel guilty because I'm glad you made me leave. I was so scared and when you wanted me to leave I tried to be brave and stay with you but when you made me go I couldn't help myself. I was glad. I was so happy to get away! Even though I knew you were going to get hurt I was happy to be away!! I could hear ..." His anguished voice broke. "I could hear them hurting you, Uncle Johnny, and Jennifer wanted to go back. I told her that you had made us promise not to, Uncle Johnny, but the truth was that I wouldn't have gone back anyway!! I was too scared!! I was too scared!!!"

Johnny gathered the weeping boy into his arms and held him. He rocked his partner's son until his sobs began to subside.

"Chris, I want you to listen to me very carefully now." Johnny spoke quietly to the snuffling head that lay upon his chest. "What you are feeling is very, very natural. It is called survivor's guilt. Anyone who comes through an experience like this feels it. Not just you. You did nothing wrong. What you are feeling is not wrong. It is human. I was scared the whole time those men had us. I almost chickened out at the last moment before I sent you and Jennifer away. I was afraid of what they would do to me. But I could never have faced your father if I had survived and something bad had happened to you or Jennifer. The fear of that guilt was worse than my fear of getting hurt. So you see, everything I did was based on fear, too. Then, after you were away I wished I could have gotten away, too. And I did everything that Max and Ollie told me to because I was too afraid not to. They threatened to hurt me in a bad way and I just gave in and did exactly what they told me to do because I wanted to survive. But I did survive, OK? We all survived and that's what counts. I swear to you that what you are feeling is perfectly OK. And I'll tell you something else, young man ..."

Johnny shifted Chris off of his chest so that he could once again look him in the eye. The young blonde had stopped sniffing and was listening intently to every word Johnny said. The dark eyed man looked straight into the wet blue ones of his friend.

"I am proud of you, Christopher DeSoto. You kept your head about you and did exactly what you were told. You remembered the instructions I gave to you and you got your sister home safely. Back into the arms of your mother and father. I couldn't be more proud of you if you were my own son."

Chris searched Johnny's face, trying to find any insincerity there. "Really, Uncle Johnny? You're not saying all of this just to make me feel better are you?"

Johnny shook his head solemnly and gathered the boy to him once more, knowing that this child, and he himself, would be all right. "No. I swear on my ancestors' spirits that I'm not saying this to make you feel better. You are a good man, Christopher DeSoto, and I'd have you watch my back again if the

need were there. I promise."

FINIS

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